

**FROM CELEBRITIES TO THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE OF INDONESIA, A  
WORKING PHOTOGRAPHER'S LIFE: PORIAMAN SITANGGANG, THE  
DANI, POST-TSUNAMI ACEH AND THE WIDOWS.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Chaos and chance are the parents of this paper, heightened in presentation by computer failure. Inspired completion has depended on the partial resurrection of my visual archive. Befitting my paper's contents, apologizing for this comparatively miniscule catastrophe caused by mechanical failure thousands of kilometres away is as pointless as apologizing for tsunamis or earthquakes. Revised and polished for electronic publication, I have sought to retain the same discursive manner used when presenting at the 17<sup>th</sup> ASAA Conference.<sup>1</sup>

In its specific examples, my paper is a work in progress, but relates to those areas of my doctoral thesis considering the intersections between art and society in Indonesia through the practice of individual artists. I am interested in how their

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responses and practices have changed since *Reformasi*, while contributing to its course. My paper suggests that the photographic work of Poriaman Sitanggang is a cogent example of this contribution.

Poriaman's work spans an arc from the late 1980s to the present day, encompassing photo-journalism for newspapers and magazines, reviving the profession of commissioned portraiture within a pre-existing historical niche, then revising it by creating exhibitions from several major artist-initiated independent studies of development in Indonesia and its juxtaposition with nature. Then came celebrity portraiture, a self-reflexive contemplation of his Batak cultural origins, followed by a major directional shift prior to *Reformasi*, when Poriaman chose the lives of the Dani from the remote Baliem Valley in Irian as the subjects of an extended study. In this project, he retained artistic control and documentary veracity while exchanging mutual 'othernesses'. Next he began contributing his skills as a photographic adviser on community projects. In these projects he used what might be described from outside as an approach and practice synonymous with subaltern studies. Simply put, Poriaman is fascinated by people.

While my response to aspects of his recent practice is informed by theoretical writing about the camera and an involvement with community arts practice in Australia, I cite Poriaman's (1995:11) description of his motivations, approaches and conceptual rationale recorded as artist's statements in catalogues or discussed in interviews.<sup>2</sup> The psychologist turned photographer explains that his photographic work comes from concept and experience, relying on what he had learnt from his work long before he knew how to do it conceptually. He also acknowledges a debt to Yogyakarta for this perspective, explaining that is where he first realised his identity as a *tukang foto* (journeyman photographer), becoming "like the peasant who toils his paddy field for the rest of his life" (Sitanggang, 1995: 13). By 1997, Poriaman

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<sup>2</sup> In his Introduction to Sitanggang's (1995) catalogue *Door Into My World*, Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo presents readers with "*A Brief History of Photography in Indonesia*". Commencing with its introduction to the Netherlands Indies within a year of its patent by Daguerre, Soerjoatmodjo (1995: 3 – 9) explains the attraction of commercial photography for its documentary and creative possibilities in an archipelago rich in natural beauty, cultural variety and diversity. He chronicles the birth of photojournalism and the opportunities it provided photographers for creative expansion and financial return as newspapers and magazines began to flourish. However, by the mid 1980s, financial revenue from advertising far outstripped that from photojournalism, which acquired status as an artform. It was then that Poriaman began his career, taking his chances with magazine assignments firstly for *Nona*, a teen magazine, then *Voice of Nature* and *Swasembada*. He began with a second-hand Canon, a single lens and an outdated flash, stating that initially, he spent more on his assignments than he was paid, so keen was he to work in this field.

decided that he was now free to choose the photographic projects on which he would work.<sup>3</sup>

## SPACE 1/1

In late 1997, a year before commencing my postgraduate studies, I had just finished a four year stint working with Aboriginal artists at Ernabella Arts in the Far North-West corner of South Australia as their Art Coordinator. In the midst of touring *Remote Red, Remote Green, Very Different*, an exhibition documenting the unique character of my working life and travels with these women and their children, I attended the ASEAN Textile Conference, *From Loom to Computer*, in Kuala Lumpur, returning home via Jakarta.<sup>4</sup> I was to travel through several different spaces, the multi-modernities of which Jim Supangkat (1997) writes in *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*. By December 1997, all these spaces were in flux, and me with them.

At the end of the conference proceedings, I was invited to speak for ten minutes, a rare privilege transcending the usual protocols. I spoke about Ernabella Arts' achievements as a remote but fully functioning indigenous arts centre, the several directions of government funded public art works in South Australia and the inclusion of indigenous artists in this program. I found myself addressing delegates like those from Kampuchea who were attempting to restart their weaving industry with nine traditional looms. Two worlds indeed! Even the most advantaged among them were part of a South-East Asian fairytale land that was beginning to implode as we dined beneath the sparkling lights of Kuala Lumpur's twin towers.

While Aboriginal health workers at home made jokes about the acronym of *Remote*, I was about to watch a true financial *penyakit gejala* (sexually transmitted disease) at work in South East Asia's "Tiger Economies", followed by desperate international attempts to prevent their complete collapse. Old certainties were to

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication, Poriaman Sitanggang, the Regent Hotel, Jakarta, December, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition *Remote Red, Remote Green, Very Different*, was exhibited first in Alice Springs in June 1997 at *Watch This Space*, then toured to the *Long Gallery*, University of Wollongong, in May 1998, and The Flinders University Art Museum in August 1998 as part of Ernabella Art Centre's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations year. Beyond a personalised photographic record and mnemonic device, *Remote* was an artistic exchange between its participating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists and also potentially, a teaching resource. It differed from Poriaman's exhibition in that, although I took most of the photographs, many of them formed part of Ernabella Arts' archive, housed, as memories, in their art centre. The larger photographs were archived in Adelaide, shared between the Flinders University Art Museum and the Ara Irititja Archive. All who participated have or are able to access a record of the show, whose ripples echo still – as do Poriaman's of the Dani through the film, *Denias Senandung Di Atas Awan* (2006, prod. Hartawan, Wiwid Setya, Ari Sihasei, & Nia Zulkarnaen). The real Denias and his street-wise friend, Enos, have both recently graduated with degrees in Information Technology.

tumble fast, especially in Indonesia.

## **SPACE 2**

In Jakarta, I stayed with sculptor Dolorosa Sinaga in Central Jakarta, sometimes setting forth with my cameras. Regrettably, I have no images of the tall apartment buildings symbolically aflame from their top floors, or the burning markets beside the canal on the way to Antara's exhibition gallery.<sup>5</sup> I have very few of the first demonstrations, which were orderly and carefully organised.<sup>6</sup> These visually arresting protests targeted selected sites and interest groups, as though to gain confidence, test strategies and set examples for the mass gatherings and marches which were to follow. Dolorosa suggested an exhibition that I must see, but that I even got there among the usual chaos, flooding and impending economic collapse was miraculous.

## **SPACE 3/1? PORIAMAN and THE DANI in the Lobby of the Regent Hotel – an unplanned visit, an unplanned meeting.**

I was caught in a traffic jam en route elsewhere. Instead of a shortcut to disaster, conventional wisdom in the desert, the taxi driver's "shortcut" took me almost directly to the Hotel Regent, Jakarta's newest luxury hotel. Remembering Dolorosa's suggestion, I asked him to stop. Fortunately the artist was present, a chance to step through his door, not only to see but to talk and compare notes on our different experiences as the inside outsider with the camera.<sup>7</sup>

It seems we shared a similar motivation, to portray the remote and often marginalised indigenous subjects before our lenses on a large scale and with dignity, making them unforgettable. But our tactics and results were quite different, as were the situations of those before our lens. For instance, Poriaman chose black and white, while I chose colour. The major photographs in *Remote* were enlarged from largely informal snapshots, as opposed to his formally posed images. Despite empathy, neither of us considered our subjects' lives in their respective locales as paradisaical, despite the cultural richness of these societies and the physical beauty of their

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<sup>5</sup> The burning buildings which taxi drivers informed me were mostly vacant, were situated in a ring some distance from Jakarta's Monas Park. The flames quothed the obelisk at its centre. Antara is Indonesia's national newswires agency. Their Museum and Gallery specialise in exhibitions related to Antara's history and to photojournalism, art and cartoons associated with the press.

<sup>6</sup> Some relevant photographic images appeared in the digital prints in my installation, *A Game of Cards From Memory, From Memory, a Game of Cards*, although I mostly used images sourced from Indonesia's popular culture – magazines, posters and so on.

<sup>7</sup> The expressive Batak invitation "entering through my door" is an invitation to share one's host's perceptions.

environments with their seasons of strange abundance. There was too much sickness and poverty through disruption and ignorance.

Moreover, the length of time since first contact with the outside and by now, mainstream national culture, was approximately similar. However, unlike the Dani, the Ernabella women were educated, preferred bright Western-style clothes – including those made from their own printed designs - and indulged their children. I doubt that these women had ever shed their dresses to be photographed naked for money by visitors, unlike the Dani at the time Poriaman photographed them (Sitanggang, 1997)! Among adults, partial nakedness was acceptable for ceremony and performance, and between 1993 and 1997, when I was at Ernabella, nakedness in small children was considered both natural and healthy. This was also captured in my photographs.

Although I envied Poriaman's situationist exhibition strategy, I explained that the Ernabella women artists' preferred strategy when we were away was to stay in hotels as often as possible, particularly those with swimming pools. In that way, they maintained aboriginal presence. By late 1997, I was unable to change the venues already established for *Remote* which were art galleries associated with Universities. The women had agreed because this largely non-selling exhibition expanded the teaching function of their work. In a sense, they were on show, but because their images were personal, exposure was buffered. Also, there would be fewer problems if a death necessitated removing sections of the exhibition.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, both exhibitions involved the participation of our subjects, although there were significant differences. Poriaman's subjects successively confront their viewers with suspicion, threat, curiosity, accommodation and finally a relaxed but knowing friendliness. Mine selected photographs from their own documentary record for the exhibition, including some they had taken themselves. These differences now inform the commentary on Poriaman's exhibition presented for this conference, as opposed to one drafted for another paper, written as a review and quoted below.

“In the catalogue for his December 1997 exhibition, commercial and celebrity photographer turned human rights activist Poriaman Sitanggang (1997) chastises the Indonesian government for its record in Irian, referring to the Dani, whose lives he unflinchingly recorded in large scale black and white photographs, as *“The People*

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<sup>8</sup> Anangu remove references to deceased persons for some time after their death, later warning about their inclusion. Had someone in the group passed away and there were many group photographs, the exhibition would have shrunk in size dramatically. Fortunately, this need did not arise.

*We Forgot*". "Why and how do we forget them?" he asks.

Short essays by a number of colleagues inform the exhibition catalogue, exposing both prejudice and the sins of omission, demonstrating that there seems to be no "correct" way to write about this subject matter, either from within or without the situation.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, in this instance, a combination of visual expression and involved and informed personal intercession temporarily transcends the representational and scholarly quandaries concerning the fraught artistic enterprise of photographically representing remote indigenous tribespeople. The strategy used by Poriaman Sitanggang and his colleagues stresses human dignity, but is also a political expose aimed at galvanising popular sentiment.

A powerful, realistic and honest photo-essay of indigenous lives and their encounters with the late twentieth century, this exhibition was carefully compiled over some years. Sitanggang's large-scale black and white, beautifully crafted photographic portraits of Dani villagers in the remote Baliem Valley of Irian speak of his dedication and respect, and the villagers' eventual willing participation to tell their story. Besides their "tribalism", Sitanggang refers to his Christianised subjects as villagers rather than tribespeople. As a Batak, he relates readily to this aspect of their lives. Most importantly, the Dani speak for themselves through his photographs.

Juxtapositionally presented in the ample Lobby of the luxurious Regent Hotel in Jakarta, the photographs heighten the receptivity of viewers who, having met the Dani thus cannot now forget them. Much to Sitanggang's delight, he – and indirectly, they - enjoy a productive interaction with a well-heeled sophisticated local and international audience. Sitanggang returns a percentage of his sales to his subjects, assisting them access the basics of health, education, clean water and food in times of scarcity. Perhaps the elderly gentleman who posed in his shoes and *horim* (penis sheath), holding Poriaman's silver photographic umbrella, later commandeered as his part of their exchange, began a fashion for umbrellas in Irian. They are now evident at markets where they shade the produce as well as its sellers."

*On reflection I later added this postscript:*

In the new Millennium, Poriaman's photographs of forgotten Indonesians from remote areas sometimes visit a café in Sanur, Bali.

An article posted on an adjunct web-site at the time of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali in December, 2007, shows Poriaman's photograph of a Dani woman carrying an enormous pile of grass on her head. Re-visiting the 1997 catalogue, I have selected a different photograph, *A Daring Pose of a Dani Woman*, for

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<sup>9</sup> Those contributing essays to *why and how Do We Forget Them?* were Drs. Marzuki Usman, MA, Mr. Keith Loveard, Dr. Kartono Mohamad, Major Navy (P) Djuanda and Poriaman Sitanggang.

reproduction and further comment.

THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



The woman confronts us with a shy but querulous gaze. Perhaps Sitanggang thought that symbiotic reminders were necessary once more in still idealistic post-Millennial times. The Dani's presence at the UNCCC reminds us that their lives are entwined with the forests which are vanishing at an increasing rate, despite many efforts to halt this depredation.

The caption across the woman's loin skirt ropes of mud-caked fibres reads:

Woman is a human being who was born seen not to have space to be credit in the Dani. Men of Dani always goes for hunting which is rarely find a target while woman goes for domestic work everyday. They rise, nurture and manage the whole of family life. Women from the Dani are a caring one. They could scarify (sic. sacrifice?) their finger to be cut if they have lost a family. Look down to her finger, some of them has gone. Not to the leprosy, but to the family grievance. Usman, 1997.

Determined to disprove Karl Muller's view that "all a person can see in such a place (Wamena and the Baliem Valley) is just another naked man", Poriaman sought and found beauty, dignity, interest and eventually a real exchange with his subjects through the photographic process. This shift in attitude was reflected in the many photographs around the exhibition space – almost the same number as those in his 1993 exhibition, *Portraits of Famous Indonesian People*. Yet Poriaman also refused to ignore the problems he encountered in the Baliem Valley, representing them among the

subjects selected, many arising from governmental neglect and the failure of development policy. He observes that week after week, every vegetable seller came to market with exactly the same range of sweet potatoes, potatoes and white onions for sale. The markets were seen as a place for socialising rather than commercial exchange, and eventually, the sellers ate the remainder of their own produce.<sup>10</sup> In his catalogue essay, Poriaman (1997) writes that the Dani do not understand the concept of competition, making it hard for them to adapt to their encounters with a much more modern twentieth century Indonesia.

Even accepting the argument made by Naval Major, (P) Djuanda (1997), that the Dani “have yet to understand the development and changement of manner occurring continuously” and may well be happy with their lifestyle and condition, Poriaman states that since first contact in 1938, the Dani have never received any assistance with surviving the new world thrust upon them. In this lack of assistance lies governmental failure to actively respect and protect their human rights. They have been forgotten by their nation, and the rest of the world. They are no longer even exotic curiosities with bare breasts, and *horim*, they are simply ignored. As Dr. Kartono Mohamad (1997), another catalogue essayist, enjoins, “They are not “The People Time Forgot”, but “The People We Forget””.

By December 1997 few people minded the straight forwardly expressed opinions published as a debate between the five essay authors in an exhibition catalogue *Why and how Do We Forget Them?*, one of whom was the artist. From my observations, a few years earlier such a catalogue would have been modified for publication.<sup>11</sup> But this time, with major sponsorships from The Jakarta Post, Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo, Asia Securities and the Hotel Regent, Jakarta, a raft of influential patrons, as well as donations from Lubis, Santosa and Maulana Law Firm, Amir Syamsuddin and Partners, Lontoh and Kailimang Law Firm, Kartini Muljadi and Rekan, Hitam Putih, Toraya Frame, Fotoplus and Nuansa – and the growing economic problems - nothing happened. Undoubtedly, the goodwill generated from Sitanggang’s

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<sup>10</sup> The latter may not have necessarily been policy failure, but rather a mistaken assumption that the Dani, like the Timorese in remote areas, shared the same concept of the marketplace as those administering this aspect of their development.

<sup>11</sup> This happened to the initial Indonesian translation of the introductory explanation for the exhibition notes written for the 1994 Australia Today exhibition of art from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands at the National Museum, Jakarta. Assisted by the curatorial staff of the Museum, the printed translation, accidentally damaged, was cut, pasted and re-arranged for display, together with the English original. No laws were broken in the process and no-one was shamed.

independently organised and financed 1993 exhibition, “*Portraits of Famous Indonesian People*” featuring prominent Indonesians from all walks of life, also helped him gather support for his work about and with the Dani.<sup>12</sup>

Contributing visual support for a subject now increasingly discussed in Indonesia’s small but emerging public domain. “*The People We Forgot*” was one more expression of the agenda for democratic representation and change characterising *Reformasi*. Poriaman considered their situation so important that he pursued his documentation using his own resources. He was doubly fortunate in that his exhibition closed one week before the Rupiah began to slide in January 1998 (O’Rourke, Kevin, 2002). For Poriaman personally, “*The People We Forgot*” became a springboard to a different way of working.

#### **SPACE 4 “*Picturing Indonesia: Through the Eyes of Widows*”**

When presenting this paper, I skipped the section dealing with Aceh because the record of Poriaman’s initial work there is largely visual, documenting its reconstruction after the earthquake and tsunami in 2004. In early June, 2008, some of his images still existed on pages in Tempo’s Data and Research Web Archive, together with “*The People We Forgot*” (see URL; <http://www.pdat.co.id/photography>). Written accounts, other than the first brief articles derived from press clippings are almost non-existent, indicating that this body of work requires further research in the field. Instead, I proceeded to an abbreviated account of the World Bank funded PEKKA program, or female-headed households initiative. I chose to maintain the thematic thread of photographing otherness, marginality and disadvantage already established.

PEKKA has been active in Indonesia since 1999. This program enabled funding for Maria Del Carmen Cossu and Poriaman Sitanggang’s community project in which they worked with widows in Aceh, West Kalimantan, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Maluku, Southeast Sulawesi, West and Central Java, and Nusa Tenggara Barat. Except for Central Java and Nusa Tenggara Barat, where women are often widowed due to fishing accidents, these areas are all recovering from civil conflict, so there are many households headed by women, all “doing it tough” in their already impoverished communities. In “*Picturing Indonesia: Through the Eyes of Widows*”, Poriaman taught these often socially ostracised women to use cameras and print their own images. The

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<sup>12</sup> This exhibition was Sitanggang’s “ark” of connection and ideas, a gauge whereby the contributions of those portrayed might be measured in later years. Post-*Reformasi*, this is an interesting exercise, linking Poriaman’s subsequent bodies of work and several aspects of this paper.

project was co-ordinated by Cossu, with whom Poriaman had worked documenting life on the troubled border between Indonesian Timor and Timor Leste in the period after Independence.

Working in groups, the widows portray the realities of their everyday lives - portraits of each other or their children, at prayer or preparing communal feasts, building confidence, bridges and roads, developing awareness of their rights and participating in the life of their communities. They demonstrate that they also have a crucial role to play in community development.<sup>13</sup> Using another activist strategy developed during *Reformasi*, the cameras also safeguarded themselves.<sup>14</sup> The PEKKA project report (2008) cites instances where they have refused a village headman's access to their cameras for community purposes, stating they must employ them to take the photographs. The report notes that the women have initiated micro-finance projects, and are consequently active in local planning and budget meetings. Brief descriptions of the PEKKA project, the boost to individual and group self-confidence, the resulting 2003 travelling exhibition of the womens' photographs, "*Picturing Indonesia: Through the Eyes of Widows*", and more on the micro-finance businesses launched by their success can be found on URL; <http://go.worldbank.org/5D4ANF95M0> and <http://go.worldbank.org/4CI49RML10>

From the beginning, PEKKA and the photographic project have been both

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<sup>13</sup> The widows' comments about their previous social invisibility are real. Since 1999, many efforts have been made to improve the accuracy of population data in Indonesia and develop government services policies accordingly. The fact that widows and female-headed households now have their own separate, non-judgemental, category within Indonesia's population statistics shows how thorough-going progress towards gender equity has been in the Reform era, even if there are still many kilometres left to go attitudinally. Listing widows and female-headed households carries through to other areas such as health, housing and income, making the group visible. Health-wise, the Indonesian Population Policy informing its Keluarga Berencana (Family Planning) operations emphasizes the importance of providing client-centred quality reproductive health information and services. While widows are undifferentiated in the maternal mortality statistics, the fact that they are encouraged to make use of services which are rightfully theirs means better health and greater longevity. Access to health services facilitates the reporting of deaths and communicable diseases, although it is still not mandatory to do so, a situation which may be made difficult by religious affiliation. The Population Policy also seeks to improve family welfare by promoting gender equity in relation to income. Most widows are in the informal labour sector where they occupy the poorest percentile. Improvements in their income earning potential are both traceable and to be desired. These are facilitated by education and training programs, micro-finance and credit schemes. Sources for population data are the Indonesian Government Yearbooks since 2000, Indonesian Census data, UNDP and the UNMDGI statistics, WHO and the World Bank.

<sup>14</sup> In 2001, Arts journalist Carla Bianpoen who had been active in consciousness raising and democratisation campaigns for women in Jakarta and Aceh describes the use of small cameras by participants in protests and political meetings with officials. Photographs confirmed numbers and the identity of those participating. They helped record events. The focus of the cone of vision supporting power in Indonesia had been well and truly reversed.

innovative and successful. Indonesia's Ministry of Home Affairs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Commission on Violence Against Women, one of Indonesia's national Human Rights organizations, to co-manage the program and ensure that the rights perspective received equal treatment with the project's development goals. The main aim was to stop the poverty spiral ensuing after the death of the male bread-winner in families. So often, widows' children were forced to leave school because their mothers could not afford to pay fees, and needed them to help earn the family livelihood. Both the PEKKA programs and the photographic project have begun to reverse this spiral, substantially improving the condition of widows and their families.

The project is remarkable in another sense. Until this point in time, many socially aware contemporary Indonesian artists as well as Non Governmental Organization members had been scathing in their criticism of World Bank funded programs, appending trenchant verbal and visual demonologies to the Bank's operations – often justifiably. In this instance, a community development worker and a professional artist used the opportunity provided by World Bank and Millenium Development Goals initiatives and funding to pursue their own project within a program which had clearly articulated socially beneficial aims, processes and expected outcomes. How did this happen?

Contextually, Indonesia had changed fundamentally due to *Reformasi* with its many political, legislative and administrative reforms. The over-arching rationale of the PEKKA initiative and the photographic project was motivated by a concern for Human Rights at the grass-roots level. The photographic project was a unique vehicle whereby PEKKA's hoped for outcomes were achieved, using the processes specified, but both aims and processes had been established through discussion and brainstorming prior to proceeding. In the era of Reform and regional autonomy, Poriaman was able to explore a different model whereby participants' lives were enriched through their engagement with the camera. Furthermore, the exhibition travelled through several of the provinces where the projects had taken place, networking the widows who had participated across borders, providing new opportunities for their subsequent ventures. Beyond that, one must accept that the benefit of such targeted community projects lies in the doing which becomes a record of accumulated achievements over a special period of time in

situations which are otherwise extremely constrained.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When speaking to the theme of the ASAA Conference, contributors were asked to consider the question, “Is this the Asian Century?” I can only reiterate my opinion ventured in my Abstract.

Hot on the heels of the unique dynamic of *Reformasi*, the spate of natural disasters added to old conflicts in Indonesia has muted, then halted, and re-shaped the flow of cross-cultural exchange projects between Indonesia and Australia. Compassionate responses and hard-nosed projects aimed at the recovery of human dignity, the re-development of infrastructure and cultural integrity among the shattered and the dispossessed have taken precedence.

By selecting the photographs of Poriaman Sitanggang, an established photographer with a diverse artistic practice, this paper convincingly demonstrates how the dynamic of *Reformasi* and Millennial events in Indonesia across the period 1997 to 2007 changed his work, the focus of his career, as well as social attitudes. This experience was shared by many other artists, who, if they so desired, shifted from cleverly expressed positions of opposition, to pro-active engagement with the increasing scope of new opportunities made available by change and events.

The alacrity and nerve with which artists became activists and assumed authority across this period is staggering, yet these strategies and the works produced can also be seen as the reclamation of earlier traditions established during the struggle for independence and early nationhood. From the mid-1990s onwards, these traditions were revived and revised in original and contemporary ways, giving more people a new voice, one educated in the values and processes of democratisation and regional autonomy. Artists’ efforts helped ordinary Indonesians embrace freedom, combating the fear which had stunted so many grass roots initiatives during the New Order period. That an established artist with a track record in commercial and exhibition photography and a community activist were authoritatively and creatively involved in a democratically canvassed and successful World Bank funded project in Indonesia was

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<sup>15</sup> Marginality, community dysfunction and poverty are the crucial aspects creating hardship for Indonesian widows. One Indonesian woman who migrated to Australia despite the death of her husband just before their immigration application was successful, recently told me that although she liked Australia, she felt more ostracised as a widow here. However, she was from Jakarta, well educated, employed and with a large extended family who were there to assist her, a situation very different to that of the widows in the photographic projects.

previously unthinkable. Poriaman, Maria and the widows with their cameras demonstrate how so many Indonesians have grabbed their “Asian Century”, tragedy, flaws and all, with both hands.

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