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## TOWARDS A FESTIVAL OF NONGKRONG: QUESTIONING MODELS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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### ABSTRACT

*As artists conceive, plan, and produce specific responses to environmental crises, their cultural practices including their visual languages develop new relationships to local, national and global politics. This research explores these innovative forms of cultural activism as a site of friction where meaning is produced and exchanged. I use the word 'friction' as intended by Anna Tsing, as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up our contemporary world.*

*This paper focuses on the production of culture in the collaborative setting of an environmental art festival in Salatiga called Festival Mata Air, which simultaneously adopts and rejects existing cultural models. Rather than gallery-based artworks designed to engage with a community on prescribed levels, initiatives such as this event and its resulting outcomes are process-based cultural projects, given a specific place in the local history of a neighbourhood, and opening spaces for meaningful cultural exchange.*

**Keywords:** culture, visual culture, activism, community, art, festival, environment

### OVERVIEW

Living in a large cosmopolitan city like Bandung or Sydney, it is possible at times to feel quite optimistic about the idea of a creative economy. As I write this paper, it is Sydney Biennale time, a period of a few months when a lot of people actually look at art, read about art, and even get together to talk about art. It may seem like art and culture are winning a battle for public attention. 'Finally', those of us in the 'culture industry' exclaim, 'art is popular.' But are there dangers in winning? Shifts towards a creative economy may give us the ability to organise creative places and to control our own cultures. But in becoming controlled, can culture be rendered useless?

I would like to suggest that cultural frameworks are most useful in the spaces they create between large projects and events, between what are termed 'cultural products'. To use a specific visual arts example, that it is what is left out of a biennale that makes it an important event, that gives it imaginative potential. My research is largely about those openings.

The ideas from this paper come from my experiences as a cultural organiser in Indonesia and Australia, a role I feel demands a difficult sacrifice of creative time and energy for tasks required of institutions

rather than arts communities themselves. My aim is not to complain about the joylessness of arts administration. Rather, I wish to look at the process of organising as both an essential friction between existing models and the necessary creation of new scenarios for presenting and creating art. In forming models, such as festivals, is it possible in some cases to go too far in organising culture, to overdevelop?

I co-direct Gang Festival, an artists' initiative with very few links to 'legitimate' organizations or art institutions. It is a festival that relies on nongkrong as its primary practice and employs laneways as its primary presentation space. Most importantly, Gang Festival, while an initiative of Australian artist communities, takes its lead from local festivals in Indonesia as it does its name (referring more to the Indonesian word for alleyway than the English word for mob). It is those source festivals that I wish to discuss in detail here, particularly with regards to the possibilities they present for exchange and the production of place.

## **FESTIVAL AS FRICTION**

What I would like to discuss here is the specifics of culture as a form of resistance. To pick up on a point from the paper by Professor Cuthbert at the 2006 Arte Polis conference:

'Culture must be understood within the evolving dynamic of socio-economic relations, and beyond this has no meaning. In order to mitigate greed, corruption and abuse at a global level, the concept of resistance must be maintained so that all forms of exploitation remain visible. So culture must always retain the ability to be critical of governments, institutions and individuals. Similarly, all concepts transferred from developed nations to developing nations must be treated with extreme caution, and the creative city, the creative class and the cultural economy are three such ideas.'

What does it mean for Indonesia to join the international festival circus? What is the point of appropriating the cultural diversity model from places where, unlike in Indonesia, economies are driven by immigration and cultural policy is designed around 'multiculturalism'?

Here, I point to the possibility of 'festival' as more than a concept that is 'transferred,' but as a site of friction for differing encounters with all these ideas of culture, for example cultures of resistance and the inevitability of liberal capitalism, or anarchist gift economies and an all-pervasive consumer culture. By 'friction', I refer to Anna Tsing's ethnographic metaphor for global connection.

Speaking of friction is a reminder of the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form, and agency. Friction is not just about slowing things down. Friction is required to keep global power in motion. (Tsing 2005:6)

This paper does not have the scope to delve into the history of the festival, which could cover forms of carnival in the folk culture of Europe in the Middle Ages, harvesting rituals here in Java, to large-scale music concerts in America. What is interesting in the context of this conference is that festivals are often placed in the 'culturescape' of the creative economy as 'spectacles', sites of spectacular consumption and media hype. (Debord 1973) However, as I have seen often in the case of environmental activism in Indonesia, they are also sites of resistance. Conceptually, temporary utopias; practically, strategic ways to create a transformative presence with no guarantee of long-term funding. The cultural festivals I have observed in Indonesia have more in common with what American anarchist Hakim Bey coined temporary autonomous zones. In his essay T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism, he describes the formation of an impermanent collective territory as a means for empowerment through creativity.

So can a festival really be a model of anything other than unresolvable cultural friction? I would like to offer a metaphor from any Indonesian kitchen. If we think of a festival like a sambal, there are some basic ingredients and production processes required; chilli, salt and a mortar and

pestle to name a few. A festival has an opening and a closing, and processes of cultural exchange, whether between audience and performers, or participants themselves. The point about sambal is that everybody makes it differently. There are recipes available, but making a good sambal still relies on a refinement process, in my experience involving more than one set of taste buds, and a sensitive consideration of the layers of seasoning, what could be deemed a collective tweaking.

In my opinion, sambal cannot be commodified. You can buy it in a jar, but few would argue, there is just no comparison. Arts festivals are a bit the same. To be interesting, they have to go beyond adopting universal formulas. In a historical context, they can be seen as a reconnection with local cultural identity after the long and omnipresent processes of colonisation, nationalisation, commercialisation, and urbanisation. But they should also be fresh. They should employ local knowledges. They should have foundations, but they should be open to change, even at the very last minute.

What I would like to point to today is one example (there are many more) of a festival with very local flavours. It is significant perhaps not as a model of an event, but rather as a local approach to the pressure of global culture. Through revelry, this festival is an attempt to bring to the public arena serious environmental concerns in this case waste and water. The festival approach, while temporary in its realisation, indicates long-term political visions of communities. In contrast to the homogenising forces of popular consumer culture, these events simultaneously develop in different directions, following the margins and crevices of local meaning.

### **Festival Mata Air, Tanam Untuk Kehidupan (TUK), Salatiga, 2006, 2007**

Tanam Untuk Kehidupan formed in 2005 when the artist Rudy Ardianto returned to the city of Salatiga at the foot of Mount Merbabu with his family after living in Australia for ten years. Rudy spent time with other painters in the area, some old friends, and some from a new generation of artists frustrated by the lack of exhibition, study, and work prospects. If young artists in Salatiga wanted to continue studying, it seemed they generally had to go to art school in Yogyakarta, Bandung or Jakarta, which was expensive. There were many established artists in Salatiga but young people didn't have access to galleries or curators. Some wanted the opportunity to stay in Salatiga where they could study with senior painters and remain connected to their local community, so they became active setting up TUK. Many of TUK's members have also been artisans who do not have formal art educations at all, but have earned a living and developed valuable skills carving or painting intricate designs into wood furniture and houses.

The name has several levels of meaning. Tuk means 'water source' in Javanese. At that time, water was becoming an urgent environmental and social issue as ancient sources were facing depletion and contamination, and soaring populations in the cities of Central Java forced water rates up. The group looked for an acronym that could also give meaning in Bahasa Indonesia, and came up with Tanam Untuk Kehidupan, which translates literally as 'planting for life.'

TUK members describe their practice as art that sidesteps both individual egos and cultural institutions through a collective process of design and implementation. In July 2006, TUK negotiated to borrow a disused council building in the centre of Salatiga as their headquarters for an ambitious program of events over the next few months, culminating in a three-day art and music festival in November called Festival Mata Air (Festival of Water).

The main site of activities was 'Senjoyo', an ancient natural spring that is believed by locals to ensure long life and is also the primary water source for the majority of the population of Salatiga. On weekends, hundreds of people from the surrounding area come to the public baths there to bathe and do laundry. The spring has experienced a dramatic decrease in water levels because of an increase in the textile industry and the depletion of surrounding forests. (Sartono and Haryo 2006: 1)

During the three-day festival, around two hundred people camped in the council park above Senjoyo. There was a main stage that hosted a range of performances ranging from the local high school choir to punk bands. The spring was also used for games, performance, and general

recreation. Information stalls were set up by local environment groups. There was also a market place for independent producers, a workshop area, and a children's area.

The second Festival Mata Air was held during the first week of September, 2007. This time, it was in Kalitaman, a modest urban kampung in the centre of Salatiga. The move from Senjoyo was to encourage a more intense relationship between the artists and the neighbourhood, to involve more people in the organising, and to be accessible to a wider audience. This time there was again a market and children's art activities, but also community forums, an exhibition of environmental art, large-scale installations (all made from garbage), workshops on reuse of packaging and other post-consumer waste, recycling, composting and do-it-yourself printing, and a more developed residency program for International exchange artists.

## **EXCHANGES: RUBBISH, GIFTS, MEANING**

So what happens at a festival like this that is so significant? It is important to think of culture as 'a range of meaningful social practices in which visual images' effects are embedded.' (Rose 2001:14) In this case, I would like to draw attention to two artworks in particular as visual texts which demonstrate politics directly and have important roles in the drama of the festival culture. It is hoped that this discussion sheds light on these practices by analysing the images and objects themselves, addressing some of the processes associated with their production.

Indra Yanti is a textile artist working in Yogyakarta. I have had the pleasure of documenting a number of her performances including *Menjahit Sampah* (Sewing Rubbish, 2006), when she perched herself on the edge of Senjoyo in the days leading up to Festival Mata Air and, with her sewing machine, joined the plastic packaging from the river bed (which was preventing the flow of ground water) into a large patchwork. Later that year, she produced *Fashion Sampah* (Rubbish Fashion, 2006), in both Yogyakarta and Padang as part of 'Hari Ini Adalah Hari Seni,' a festival designed by Belanak art community. In that work, she unpacked a suitcase of ten costumes, including accessories, all made from recycled materials, and dressed 'spontaneous' local models for an ironic fashion show, complete with paparazzi.

Djuadi, an artist from Randublatung, also uses post-consumer waste. His work *Melati Sampah* (Trash Jasmine, 2007), works on the principle of revaluing the devalued, and extending the gift economies of activist networks into the art world. The piece was conceived during the opening parade of the second Festival Mata Air. During the lead up to the festival, Djuwadi collaborated with children to make elaborate costumes and musical instruments from rubbish. On the day of the opening, after helping the children prepare, he joined the parade in civilian clothing, collecting rubbish along the way and pinning it to his garments with safety pins until he was entirely covered with instant noodle packets, cigarette boxes and permen (sweet hard candy) wrappers. Over the six days of the festival, Djuwadi developed the idea, folding the rubbish into beautiful flowers and pinning them not only to himself but to people he met in the street, carefully choosing colors and patterns appropriate to people's outfits matching, for example, the glossy browns of the nescafé label to the warm natural tones of a traditional batik shirt.

In the West, the type of practice in both of these works is associated with contemporary trends in artistic production, namely 'relational art', a phrase coined by the French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. *Melati Sampah* and *Fashion Sampah* can be viewed as visual conversations typical of the 'intersubjective' encounters produced in relational art. It is through these conversations 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 Djuwadi and Indra 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 2002:5).

The diverse experiences of Indonesia's violent history make grand narratives in art or any other field impossible to justify. Amongst others, Indonesian artist and critic Jim Supangkat has written extensively about the concept of 'multimodernism' to describe the ways in which Indonesian

culture in the Twentieth Century both adopted and resisted Western art forms and philosophies. He rejects, for example, claims that installation art in Indonesia is a post-modern paradigm. Supangkat writes that the term 'installation' was only introduced to Indonesia in 1991 (Supangkat 1997:10). He argues that Indonesian cultures have, well before this date, used the placement of objects in a certain context in order to convey certain feelings, ideas or experiences as a medium of artistic expression. In the same way, art that is based on relationships between artists and audiences (whether or not it is classified as art) has developed in Indonesia from non-Western traditions.

In his book *One Place After Another*, Kwon similarly 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 2002:107).

This is a very important point that can be expanded to more general cultural activities. What kind of transformations if any occur when 'great traditions' are pushed into the moulds of cultural frameworks. For example, what happens when a storytelling tradition based on an oral culture is written down? Indigenous Australian culture was almost obliterated through European invasion and it is only now that in Australia, we are starting to look to indigenous knowledge as the way to manage environmental and cultural heritage. In fact, the integration of this knowledge with cultural and environmental policies is the only way to survive, now that river systems have dried up and Australia faces its self-made water crisis. In many serious ways (and many would say irreversibly), in just two hundred years, we have failed in our cultural transformation as a nation.

For Djuwadi, Indra, and other Indonesian artists working from collectives placed neither within the international art circuit nor the international market, 'relational art' has been a tactic of survival and resistance rather than a consideration of trends in a global contemporary aesthetic. Without an effective national art infrastructure, collaborating with communities often on a village level in rural areas has also sometimes been the only way to engage any audience or sustain any kind of ongoing practice over their creative careers. While these are obvious constraints, it is a mistake to view the resulting practices as inadequacies, rather as specific directions in cultural development.



Figure 1: Fashion Sampah, Indra Yanti, Padang, 2006



Figure 2: Melati Sampah, Djuwadi, Salatiga, 2006

These works are spawned from a culture of consumerism that is, tragically, absolutely global. Its materials are the refuse from products made in factories and sold all over the world to fulfill universally-created desires. In line with the replacement of fresh, self-sufficient food production by the distribution of highly refined products, packaging has become a ubiquitous language. So, as well as the imaginative transformation that occurs via the artist, the work has the potential to be socialised across cultures, making connections between people from vastly different places. And it is this that Djuwadi and Indra do so simply and elegantly. They makes flirtatious offerings, which, among other interpretations, could be gestures of good will or an accusations of guilt, but are quite unambiguously meetings of bodies through an ironic object that articulates a commonality and a connectedness through friction.

The important point about the work of Djuwadi and Indra is not that they are cute 'eco-chic' ideas, but that they start something. The exchanges generate a new set of insights at the points of intersection between artist and audience. The artworks themselves, like the festivals from which they emerge, disrupt the normal cycle of consumption and waste with a small side-step of individual expression (in the case of the artworks) and collective expression (in the case of the festival). This cycle indeed has no set origin or outcome, but the artists ask us to revisit processes we take for granted. The objects themselves make concrete something precarious, an exchange between people; and makes permanent something inherently temporary, a performative gesture.

## **PERFORMATIVITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLACE**

So where do these ideas come from? If this is not relational art, is it the artistic extension of a particularly Indonesian culture of gotong royong? And how do these exchanges contribute to constructing a locality, even a temporary one? Works such as this 'take place in real time and depend on the presence of the other, whether it be the cultural other or the people in local surroundings waiting to be activated. Not least of all, the projects depend on each other in order to live on as collective memories with the people who took part, and the ones to whom the stories are told.' (Larson 2006: 183)

Looking at cultural production as a collective process help designate them to specific geographies. In the case of Festival Mata Air, the site of the event is chosen because of its relationship with water and the collective struggle of the kampung to protect it. Outside of the urban art markets, of visual culture is not only about the image or sculpture or performance itself, but the set of work patterns, relationships and environment that facilitate and make possible the situation of its production. In the case of the examples here, it is the collective labour and imagination involved in organising the festivals that make the creative outcomes possible. They occur because of the support of at least one kampung with its complex structures and relationships.

### **Tsing describes this process also through the idea of friction.**

'Everyone knows a commodity: It is the material good of capitalist production and the object of the consumers' desire. Commodities seem so familiar we imagine them ready made for us throughout every stage of production and distribution, as they pass from hand to hand until they arrive at the consumer. Yet the closer we look at the commodity chain, the more every step even transportation can be seen as an arean of cultural production. Global capitalism is made in the friction in these chains as divergent cultural economies are linked, often awkwardly. Yet the commodity must emerge as if untouched by this friction.' (Tsing 2005: 51)

Returning to the metaphor of the sambal, while the final cultural product may be made in one kitchen, each element, including the recipe, has gone through quite separate production processes, combining finally into a delicious condiment that is essential to the meal itself. Viewed as their elements and referencing the complexity of their production processes, these artworks tease and ridicule the separation of such processes. They make fun of accepted social conventions such as consumption and waste, public and private space, work and play, and in the case of the fashion show, celebrity and audience, by pointing to the spaces between these dichotomies, negating the very idea of the commodity chain being smooth and inevitable.

Referring to the performative nature of language, Judith Butler (1997) describes it as a disruption of a framework, but one that relies on the certain time and place that is being disrupted.

'Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context. Thus performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks. This ambivalent structure at the heart of performativity implies that, within political discourse, the very terms of resistance and insurgency are spawned in part by the powers they oppose. (Butler 1997: 40)

It is easy to see how Djuwadi's jewellery and Indra's costumes are 'spawned' from consumerism. Its materials are the refuse from products made in factories and sold to us to fill a created desire. Part of the replacement of self-sufficient food production with centralised highly refined products. But the important act is not this imaginative transformation that occurs with the artist. For a visual text to be politicised, it needs to be socialised, to make connections between people. And it is this that these artists do so simply and elegantly. They make a flirtatious offering, which could, among other interpretations, be a gesture of good will or an accusation of guilt, but is quite unambiguously a meeting of bodies through an object that articulates a commonality and a connectedness.

Last, but perhaps most important in understanding the production of meaning of these artworks, is the social practices of the audiences that view them. While I have discussed them as artworks here, none of these three works have been interpreted exactly as 'art.' Drawing from the work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, Gillian Rose argues that art galleries not only exclude certain groups of people because of the conditioning necessary to decipher art, but that art galleries and other cultural institutions actually define a person as middle class. (Rose 2001: 28) In the case of the artworks discussed here, and of the festivals overall, one of the main goals is to re-discover that most basic connection between artist and audience in ways which aren't compromised by bureaucracy. So why do we build art galleries at all in a place like Indonesia, when there is such a rich tradition of art and performance integrated into every day life, on the street, in train carriages, and in the kampung.

## CONCLUSION

Presented here are just a few examples of works that can emerge from an event such as Festival Mata Air. They show that the direct engagement of Indonesian artists with specific issues and communities has not 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. For the two contemporary Indonesian artists presented in this paper, who have been for the most part ignored by international curators anyway, collaboration with communities has been a tactic of resistance rather than a consideration of relational aesthetics. Lacking a reliable national art infrastructure, working with communities, often on a village level in rural areas, has also sometimes been the only way to engage any audience or secure any kind of resources, relying on kinship bonds and gift economies for example. The choice has not been whether or not to work on a community level, but which communities with which to physically locate their practice.

My deduction here, looking to the forests, the villages, the towns, the cities, is that there is a diverse range of cultural models across the islands of Indonesia. It is not necessarily with the European models of cultural exchange, such as international biennales that we find the best examples of meaningful exchange between artists and audiences, integration of culture with urban planning, or forms of critical engagement with the politics of development. The encounters needed for this kind of culture are actualised in a broad range of cultural contexts. These artworks I use as examples, not so much as outcomes of these festivals, but as antidotes to the pressure towards one model of cultural production.

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