

DJUWADI: FOLDING THE RELATIONAL INTO ART

Alexandra Crosby

On a quiet Sunday evening in February, a group of artists transformed a small corner of Newtown into a night market, a place of *nongkrong* or 'hanging out', where experiences were bartered and ideas exchanged. Perth artist Sussi Porsborg invited the public to assemble 'portable cenotaphs', small handmade corsages constructed from discarded military fabric. Sydney artist Teik Kim Pok set up a karaoke massage parlor and sang *a capella* to his clients. And a small group of collaborators from Indonesia and Australia, brought together in Sydney for the three-month Gang Festival, gathered around the Indonesian concept of a *warung lesehan*, a traditional makeshift café or roadside diner.

The idea of Gang (literally translated as alleyway) is to explore creativity that emerges outside conventional art spaces in both Indonesia and Australia. In 2008, this meant looking to some of the many small artist-run festivals in Java that are designed as sites for a very local style of artistic exchange. Among these are *Festival Mata Air* (Festival of Water), Forest Art Festival and the OK

Video Festival. Like a *warung lesehan*, which is usually assembled around meal-times and afterwards dismantled leaving barely a trace of the evening's activities, artists' festivals are temporary in their realisation but can be long-lasting in their effect.

The climate of greater political and social freedom in Indonesia over the last decade has prompted the formation of a number of collectives, including Taring Padi, anakseribupulau and Tanam Untuk Kehidupan. These groups use art to raise awareness of, for example, environmental crises both specific (forest depletion and mudslides) and general (looming nuclear power proliferation), and to encourage community-led change. Some artists are simultaneously active in a number of these collectives.

One artist whose work pops up repeatedly in artist-run festivals across Indonesia is Djuwadi. Djuwadi has no formal art training: he describes himself as a woodworker, a performer and an organiser. His work is



STAGES OF CREATION OF A MELATI SAMPAH CORSAGE BY DJUWADI, INDONESIA, 2007.

FOLDED PLASTIC, SAFETY PINS, ONGOING EXCHANGE, MULTIPLE DESIGNS, 10.00 CM X 10.00 CM

OPENING PARADE AT THE FESTIVAL MATA AIR (FESTIVAL OF WATER), HELD IN THE VILLAGE OF KALITAMAN, CENTRAL JAVA, 2007. PARTICIPANTS WEAR ELABORATE COSTUMES CREATED FROM RECYCLED 'RUBBISH' WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF ARTIST DJUWADI



varied, project-based, and has the aim to educate around issues of environment. Djuwadi comes from the small village of Randublatung on the border between Central and East Java. Many of the young men around Randublatung have learned carving through informal apprenticeships in their adolescence and now turn their skills to express concerns about exploitation of the teak forests.

Ambil aja (2006) is an ongoing work made from pieces of wood that Djuwadi whittles into delicate shapes. The title means 'Just take it', referring to the gift nature of the work. Djuwadi carries the pieces around with him, either offering them to people he meets or leaving them to be picked up by fortunate passers-by. As is always the case with gifts, there are more layers to the exchange. Referring also to attitudes to the forests around his home, *Ambil aja* also illustrates the mismanagement of the forests in Java. The demand for teak means that the forests are viewed purely as a cash crop, and are felled whether the trees have matured or not. The public euphoria coupled with the vacuum of authority that followed the fall of Suharto in 1998, Djuwadi explains, meant that much of the forest was depleted at a frightening new rate, which continues today.

'The wood that I use for my carving is usually left over from the export furniture industry. There are a lot of little pieces that can't be used so they have no value. I can use it for my work to express ideas about the material itself, and the stories of the tree it came from, which was once part of a forest. My anger

drives me to work with the wood and think about my emotional connection to place. When I give it to someone, or they just take it, something else happens, another whole process with new meanings for them. Perhaps they feel lucky. Perhaps they feel guilty. I hope they can think about where that wood came from.'

Djuwadi's work *Melati Sampah* (*Trash Jasmine*, 2007) works on a similar principle of revaluing the devalued, and extending the gift economies of activist networks into the art world. The work was conceived during the opening parade of the second Festival Mata Air (Festival of Water) in the village of Kalitaman in Central Java in 2007. Djuwadi spent a month during preproduction of the festival living in a tent on the grounds of a local political party headquarters, washing in the public baths and eating with the local *tukan ojek* (motorbike taxi drivers). This self-initiated residency was an opportunity to get to know the place and people of the *kampung* (neighbourhood community).

During the lead up to the festival, Djuwadi also worked 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 a nescafé label to the warm natural tones of a traditional batik shirt.

In the West, this type of practice is associated with contemporary trends in artistic production, namely 'relational art', a phrase coined by the French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. *Melati Sampah* 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 Djuwadi 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). *Melati Sampah* asks people to reconsider their original action of disposal. 'This is just something I did,' Djuwadi says. 'I wanted to use something people had discarded and make something beautiful.'

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

For Djuwadi, 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 resistance rather than a consideration of contemporary aesthetics. Without a 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.

The translation of a work such as this to an Australian context is, not unsurprisingly, fairly straightforward. The work *Melati Sampah* was reproduced, not only from the *warung lesehan* at the night market in Newtown, but also at the Live and Let DIY Festival in Brisbane in February 2008, and in Melbourne as part of artist talks at Forepap, also in February 2008. Djuwadi also traveled to Imanpa Arts, outside Alice Springs, as part of skill-sharing workshops. During his three-month exchange in Australia, Djuwadi folded hundreds of brooches, from both the 'exotic' rubbish he had brought with him from Java and from new packaging he collected locally.

A corsage by Djuwadi is an act of folding the superficiality and ephemerality of the cultural objects of contemporary capitalism in on themselves. It does not depend on certain ideas for understanding: it can simply be worn. The toughness of a vagabond sorting through rubbish in the street is delicately expressed. Through his work, Djuwadi takes the idea of global standardisation and uniformity and twists it, creating only varied pieces that then assume the character of the individual wearer. The material is devalued then revalued, it is



lost then made to belong; and it becomes an active agent of communication, its meaning negotiated between artist and audience.

Melati Sampah is 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. Along with the replacement of fresh, self-sufficient food production by centralised and highly refined products, packaging is a ubiquitous language. So, as well as the imagin-ative 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 does so simply and elegantly. He makes a flirtatious offering, which, among other interpretations, could be a gesture of good will or an accusation of guilt, but is quite unambiguously a meeting of bodies through an ironic object that articulates a commonality and a connectedness.

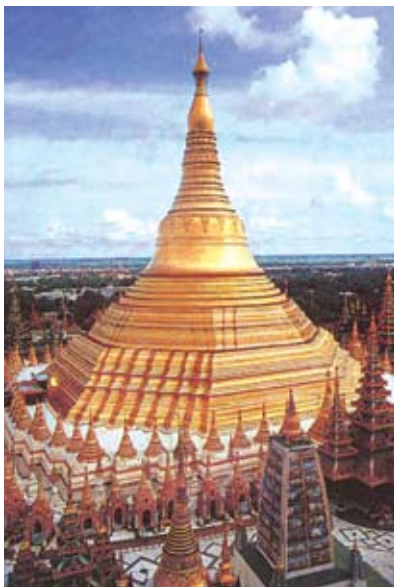
The important point about *Melati Sampah* and *Ambil Aja* is not that it is a cute 'eco-chic' idea, but that it starts something. The exchange generates a new set of insights at the points of intersection between artist and audience. For

an Indonesian artist working in Australia, these points are the only places capable of housing new meanings. The exchanges themselves, like the festivals from which they emerge, disrupt the normal cycle of consumption and waste with a small side-step of individual expression. This cycle indeed has no set origin or outcome, but Djuwadi asks us to revisit a process we take for granted. The object itself simply makes concrete something precarious, an exchange between people; and makes permanent something inherently temporary, a performative gesture.

Alexandra Crosby is a designer, writer and researcher who is currently completing a doctoral degree at the University of Technology Sydney. She also co-directs the Gang Festival (<http://www.gangfestival.com>). Research for this article was supported under Australian Research Council's Discovery funding scheme.

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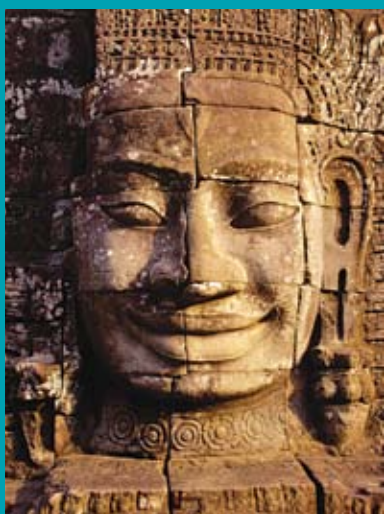
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TAASA MEMBERS' DIARY

JUNE – AUGUST 2008

Great Cities of Asia – Beijing

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No.3 in TAASA's occasional seminar series
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Sydney (26 July 2008) and Melbourne
(2 August 2008)

The modern city of Beijing occupies a site that dates back to the fabled Xanadu of Kublai Khan and earlier. Some of ancient city's walls, palaces and towers still stand; many have fallen prey to the desire for modernisation, as have its forests and fields. The history and culture of Beijing reflect the city's past glories as well as some of the dark secrets of its rulers.

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TAASA will be presenting two programs, one in Sydney at the Powerhouse Museum and one in conjunction with the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, as follows:

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Coles Theatre, Powerhouse Museum
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Speakers in Sydney will include: Prof. Jocelyn Chey *Beijing in the Western Imagination*; Prof. Geremie R. Barmé *Beijing Reoriented, an Olympic Undertaking*; Dr Claire Roberts *Hedda Morrison's Peking*; Min-Jung Kim *The Morrison Belt Toggle Collection at the Powerhouse Museum*; Dr Ye Xiaoqing *Imperial City, Chinese City - aspects of everyday life in old Peking*; John

Courtney *Beijing Transformed, a quarter century of urban change*; Ying Chang *Beyond the Dream*, a documentary presentation about the impact of the Olympic Games on Beijing.

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Melbourne seminar, Saturday 2 August 2008

BBDO Clemenger Auditorium, NGV International
St Kilda Road, Melbourne

Speakers in Melbourne will include: Prof. Jocelyn Chey *Beijing in the Western Imagination*; Prof. Geremie R. Barmé *Beijing Reoriented, an Olympic Undertaking*; Dr Claire Roberts *Hedda Morrison's Peking*; Dr Ye Xiaoqing *Imperial City, Chinese City - aspects of everyday life in old Peking*; John Denton *Beijing Architecture*; ZiYin Wang Gantner *The film industry in Beijing, then and now*.

Detailed information re times, content, costs etc. of both seminars will be provided in the brochure to be mailed to all members shortly. Or visit our website www.taasa.org.au.

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Wed 11 June Gill Green on two bark cloth jackets from 'Borneo'.

Wed 9 July tba **Wed 13 August** Margo Beasley on barkcloth from Samoa (provisional)



LOOKING SOUTH FROM COAL HILL OVER THE FORBIDDEN CITY (DETAIL) BY HEDDA MORRISON, CHINA 1933-1946.

SILVER GELATIN PRINT. COLLECTION: POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY