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Under the Radar: thoughts on Indonesian exhibition strategies

Sue Ingham, May 2008.

Through the *Gang* festivals of artistic co-operation between Australia and Indonesia, groups of young activists are challenging preconceived ideas of what constitutes a work of art, how art is exhibited and who is the target audience. Their strategies of networking and exhibiting fly under the radar of mainstream art exhibition. One of the events from Gang’s visual arts stream was the *SISA* exhibition, held at the University of Technology Gallery in November, 2007. *SISA* provoked thoughts about exhibition strategies and how they are changing. Even the name itself, *Sisa*, or rubbish, questions the way the artwork is valued and how values can shift, especially when activists sometimes declare their work is not art at all.

The established concept of exhibiting art tends to involve a gallery space that is either commercially or publically supported, in Indonesia usually the former as there is little or no public or government-financed infrastructure for modern and contemporary art. Most of the public exhibition spaces, such as the *Galeri Nasional* near Gambir railway station and even *TIM* (*Taman Ismail Marzuki*), in Cikini Raya in Jakarta, are really just spaces for hire. In the past the Suharto regime favoured traditional arts and crafts, such as *gamalan* music, *wayang* puppet theatre and *batik* textile dying, as tools for national unity in an archipelago of ethnic diversity rather than the potentially more contentious contemporary art.

The commercial gallery system developed late but swiftly in Indonesia and favoured decorative painting and sculpture for the growing middle classes. By the 1990s it had become a major source of investment and, after the economic collapse associated with *Reformasi*, a wildly overheated market for hedge investment. Yet at the same time an alternative to this commercially viable art was also developing – an activist art often in the form of performance or installation that was socially and politically critical. As the commercial mainstream initially provided no outlet for such work, a network of alternative galleries and exhibition spaces developed to exhibit this work, foremost amongst them the gallery *Rumah Seni Cemeti* in Yogyakarta. By the late 1990s, galleries like *Cemeti* had become mainstream themselves, the powerbrokers and gatekeepers of contemporary

Indonesian art to the rest of the world: so alternatives to the alternative began appearing, activist collectives like the ones whose work was exhibited in the *Sisa* exhibition.

In common with the previous generation, the art of this new young generation is also activist. There is a long and respectable history of contemporary art that addresses the socio/political environment in Indonesia, for pressing contemporary issues have made it difficult to operate as an individual artist isolated from society. Many artists were active during *Reformasi* and continue to use art to press for reform, working with NGOs and organisations such as WAHLI, the Indonesian Friends of the Earth¹ from conviction as well as for income.

Can art change anything? The conventional answer used to be no, that political art was just propaganda, and many artists retreated from the suggestion that their art could ever effect change. But why can't propaganda be art as well? There is a whole body of early 20th century Russian and German art that is transparently propagandist and now highly regarded art.² Can art change anything is, though, the wrong question: it is not art that makes change but people with convictions who use art. The common denominator of all activist art is that old 1970s phrase: 'consciousness-raising': activist art may not explicitly spell out a message but it can raise awareness. An example of this can be seen in the work of one of the collectives shown in the *Sisa* exhibition, *Anakseribupulau (Child of a thousand islands)*. They used wood in their work, *Sisa Kayu, Ambil Aja? (Wood scraps, just take them)*, the title and the medium provoking the question, where did the 'scraps' come from? And the answer elucidates the issues surrounding the environmental degradation of the Indonesian forests.

The established art spaces didn't accommodate this new activist art comfortably as it can be critical of the commercial and artistic framework of the gallery. A particular exhibition held in *Rumah Seni Cemeti* in 2003 illustrates growing differences in approach. The art activist group from Jakarta, *ruangrupa*,³ held an exhibition titled *Lekker Eten Zonder Betalen* or Tasty Meal without Paying which, in art parlance, was a 'happening' that ended as an installation. The night before the opening *ruangrupa* threw a party. It ended in total chaos, food thrown on the walls, noise disturbing the neighbours and the likelihood of police

¹ WAHLI: *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*, or Indonesian Environmental Forum, an umbrella group for smaller environmental organizations

² If challenged on this I would cite Rodchenko's posters and John Heartfield's photomontage.

³ *ruangrupa* is written in lower case to signal the group's commitment to broad cultural aims, see Hendro Wiyanto, "Alternative Space & Culture Analysis", an interview with Ade Darmawan, published in *Kompas*, Feb. 2005 and also found at <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2005/ruangrupa> de

intervention. *ruangrupa* then demanded that the remains constitute the exhibition, all the mess, the happenings and recordings from the event were to be left in place as part of the ‘energy of the exhibition’, they said.

Cemeti holds a distinctive place in the Indonesian art world. It was a gallery founded in 1988 by the artists, Nindityo Adipurnomo and his Dutch – born wife, Mella Jaarsma and it had gained a reputation in the 1990s for being experimental, alternative to the mainstream and also, in its way, activist. *Cemeti* survived by developing international contacts which eventually led to exhibiting in major international biennales. The sales of their work were advanced by this international exposure and provided a large part of the cost of the new, purpose - built *Cemeti* gallery that opened in Yogyakarta in 1999. *Cemeti* became the template for contemporary art spaces and part of a new art mainstream that included such galleries as *Selasar Sunaryo* in Bandung and *Nadi* gallery in Jakarta.

Cemeti is designed on the basis of a European exhibition space or art gallery and would fulfill most Western expectations of what a gallery should be. The design creatively incorporates a reconstructed old Javanese house at the entrance in front that connects to a light, white-walled gallery space at the back where the most of the work is hung. It holds regular exhibitions, promotes individual artists and has a stock room of works to be sold. Many of the artists who have exhibited there have had successful international careers, including Mella and Nindityo themselves. In this context *ruangrupa*’s event was like an assault on that pristine space and a challenge to the concept of the exhibition gallery itself. Mella missed the opening as she was on a residency program in Singapore. Nindityo, distressed, sent an email saying, ‘don’t be mad at me’, for the mess with rats and maggots would remain for a month rotting and smelling in the gallery.⁴

Cemeti weathered this event, possibly accepting it in the terms of an experimental, conceptual work of art, and the exhibition flyer argued that *ruangrupa* had brought the communal process of eating a meal into the gallery, bridging art and life. Certainly there are precedents for such work and *ruangrupa* was likely to know of them: the European Fluxus artist, Daniel Spoerri, had held a dinner party as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 1979 and the remains, complete with dirty plates and cigarette stubs, had been glued to a tablecloth, mounted and hung on the wall. The work was donated to the National Gallery of Australia and can be

⁴ *Cemeti Art House, (2003) 15 years Cemeti Art House: exploring vacuum, 1988-2003, Yogyakarta, Cemeti Art House, 'Anecdotes', p.7*

found on their website. But Spoerri's dinner party seems almost tame in comparison to *ruangrupa*'s event. I suggest something else was also operating here: this was a subversive attack upon what had become establishment art, forcing the accepted system of the gallery to encompass a group that networked, marketed their work and related to its social environment in a different way. They are, in effect demanding that art admit into its definition much that still does not sit comfortably with the idea of art.

ruangrupa and the groups in the *Sisa* exhibition normally operate outside the mainstream gallery system. They network through youth and student groups both inside and outside Indonesia, using the Internet when they can, or making connections at a personal level, for example with young Australian students travelling or resident in Indonesia on such programs as ACISIS.⁵ Many of the activist art groups are fragile and live on the smell of an oily rag, living in mutually supportive communities and working collaboratively. Yet *Taring Padi*, also exhibiting in *Sisa*, has survived as a group for nearly 10 years and *ruangrupa* nearly 8. They market at a local level, crafting objects, selling designs on T-shirts or printing flyers for events. Much of these artistic activities occur outside the famous art academies such as *ISI*, in Yogyakarta and *ITB* in Bandung,⁶ although group members may have been once been students there. Groups in Yogya, for example, would include young artists interested in technology, music and art who conduct jam sessions in each other's places, or young female ceramic artists who shared houses and studios in the Bantul region of southern Yogya, (an area that was badly damaged after the severe earthquake). It was in these groups that the interesting and experimental work was being done and the academies were like a dead zone of conservatism.

These cross-cultural contacts by-pass mainstream curatorial channels and find sponsorship, residencies or exhibitions overseas for themselves. *ruangrupa* now receives support from HIVOS, a branch of the Dutch government, and *Taring Padi* gained funding from their contacts in Australia, America and Germany to finance the building of a *sanggar* in Yogya after their studio was destroyed in the Yogya earthquake. The cost of living in Indonesia in comparison to Australia is subject to different factors. Money from overseas goes a long way in Indonesia on the current exchange rate and studio accommodation and food is relatively cheap. In Australia studio space for art activists is prohibitively expensive, but then not only

⁵ ACISIS: Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies, a program established to co-ordinate study programs in Indonesian universities for undergraduate Australian students, see

<http://www.acicis.murdoch.edu.au/>

⁶ *ISI*: Institut Seni Indonesia; *ITB*: Institut Teknologi Bandung.

can Australian artists support themselves with part time jobs but there are economic safety nets that just don't exist in Indonesia.

ruangrupa's assault on *Cemeti* was uncomfortable, to say the least, but the work seen in the *Sisa* exhibition made a different transition from its usual display in the activist community to a conventional art gallery. What was designated as rubbish or the detritus of society or *Sisa* in Indonesia looked and felt like art in the UTS art gallery space. Unlike *ruangrupa's* 'tasty meal', this rubbish glowed in the lighting of the gallery and gained the special aura of an art object. It is the ability of these pieces to make the translation from rubbish in the community to the rarefied atmosphere of the gallery that is significant. In comparison, art that is conceived in the context of the gallery and dependent on that preciousness rarely makes a similar transition to the street or village.

In making this transition, though, have the activist aims for the work been compromised? Has the activism been disempowered by the aesthetics of display and the commodification of the object? For these works were for sale. It could be argued that, on the contrary, what was devalued in one context was revalued in another, and in this new context the ingenuity is appreciated and its beauty enhanced.

The collective, *TUK*, (*Tanam Untuk Kehidupan* or Planting for Life, made a series of animals and birds from plastic and cardboard containers and displayed them on a play table with flying swans suspended from the ceiling above. They called the works *Main-main*, or *Just playing*. The work, *Bimo Tarung*, by A A o Season, another member of *TUK*, is a figure created out of scrap metal and dismembered appliances. This figure has been transformed into a hero wrestling with a serpent which recalls stories from the *Ramayana* that are played out in the *wayang*. His feet are made from domestic electric irons but are transformed into exotic pointed shoes that at the same time provide a solid base for the figure. Effective art can not only reflect the issues arising from its social context but involve the viewer at an emotional level. The dog/chair, titled *General Kill More* by Aris Prabawa of the *Taring Padi* group, is an aggressive metal general made from an office swivel chair, implying the brutality of the military. It engages the viewer with the uncomfortable subliminal suggestion that the dog's head/seat would bite if you sat on it. All the materials in these works, though, also remind us of the pollution of packaging and the waste resulting from consumerism.

Gallery exhibition is, then, only one outlet for these committed activist collectives and they will use any opportunities that arise. They broaden the definition of what constitutes art and reach a different and often new demographic of viewers, flying under the radar of the conventional outlets of the art world.