

THE JAKARTA BIENNALE

Background:

The Jakarta Biennale began as the ‘Grand Exhibition of Indonesian Painting’ (Pameran Besar Seni Lukis Indonesia) in 1968, but over the years it has changed, reflecting changes in the Indonesian art world. In 1993 the term, biennale, was used to reflect a greater range of artistic media than just painting.

The Jakarta Biennale is run by the Jakarta Arts Council, an organization that has been seen as conservative, but like the biennale itself, the Council has changed in recent years. The biennale has had a particularly Jakarta city focus but, following the failure of the CP Biennale in its attempt to gain recognition for Indonesian art in the contemporary art circuit, there has now been an attempt to make the Jakarta Biennale international.

The 15th Jakarta Biennale was held from November 9th to the 30th last year, 2013, in the parking basement of the Teater Jakarta, part of Taman Ismail Marzuki. Initially this was because the usual venues for the biennale were unavailable but the site also seemed appropriate for the biennale theme of *Siasat*.

Siasat can be defined as ‘tactics’ but also suggests creative improvisation with limited resources. This theme is an extension of the ideas and interests of the director, Ade Darmawan who, coming from the artists’ co-operative, *ruangrupa*, encouraged biennale artists and groups to explore community participation in activities that relate to urban life.

NOTES FROM JAKARTA: the 15th Jakarta Biennale, a report by Carla Bianpoen

Every biennale endeavours to reinvent itself, depending on available creative and financial resources, both organizational and curatorial. Over the years, the ups and downs of Jakarta Biennale, which has grown from an exhibition organized by concerned painters to an event led by the Jakarta Arts Council, have been marked by the challenge to move creatively within the limitations that included the changing perspectives of the Jakarta Arts Council.

The appointment of executive director Ade Darmawan, who heads *ruangrupa*, (a community based group that has, since 2000, linked the arts to urban communities) and artistic director Hafiz Rancajale, one of the founders of *ruangrupa* and *Forum Lenteng* (which focuses on socio cultural studies through films and videos) has resulted in a youthfully creative, if not social/ activist spirit that defined the 15th Jakarta Biennale.

Undeterred by the unavailability of the usual exhibition spaces in the capital city, the Biennale director and his team transformed the parking lot underneath the Jakarta Theatre at TIM, Taman Ismail arts and cultural park, in central Jakarta into a venue where the participating art works found a place for exposure. While not one hundred percent adequate in terms of facilities, the creative spirit permeating the display deserves a thumbs up. What is certainly equally important is that it responded to the biennale's overall theme of *SIASAT*, a term that generally denotes tactics and strategies to circumvent existing hurdles in order to achieve an intended objective.

Coincidentally, the selected works fitted well into this hot, leaking and sometimes smelly, parking lot in the basement, and would perhaps have not had the success they reaped had they

been placed in a neat, white-cube-like venue. An additional advantage was the location which lies centrally at TIM, where students abound and folks seeking a respite from the urban stresses easily find access.

Some 48 artists and artists groups took part. Aside from Indonesia, also participating in this biennale were artists from The Netherlands, China, Canada, France, Singapore, South Africa, Australia, Argentina, Germany, Mexico, South Korea, Kenya, Palestine, Vietnam, the Czech Republic and Malaysia.

The parking lot was the largest venue accommodating some 40 works, but the biennale extended into smaller spaces along the streets, parks, traditional markets, and in the old city area, including Museum Seni Rupa dan Keramik. Workshops and other participatory projects were conducted in those parts of the city where art exhibitions are rarely held.

For the art crowds that are used to having mainstream exhibitions in the central part of the city, the remote corners where projects and workshops were held as part of the event, were less favourable due to complicated transportation. But activities in those places were important initiatives to spread art to art-marginalized places, and what is more, they involved the community not only in art, but in real projects benefitting the local community.

One such project was the facilitation of a futsal court underneath the highways in the densely populated Penjaringan area in North Jakarta where space for recreation is very limited. The project was undertaken by the *Jatiwaringin Art Factory* (JAF), which focuses on cultural studies through art and cultural activities, and the Penjaringan community-based *TROTTOIR* group who assisted in setting up the facility.



Enrico Halim installation, Jakarta Biennale.

Another interesting community project saw **Enrico Halim** take 10 invited teachers and artists to traditional markets and public spaces to share their knowledge of art. He did so using an old bemo transformed to an electrically driven vehicle which had been denied licence for operation on Jakarta's roads. **Abdulrahman Saleh** alias Maman took garbage men to decorate their gerobak, the carts that daily fetch the city's household trash. Enrico's Bio Bemo was featured in an artistic display at the major exhibition venue, as was the decorated garbage gerobak.



Abdulrahman Saleh installation, Jakarta Biennale.

Sanggar Anak Akar is a learning community for marginalized children that, since 1989, focused on the development of art through creative initiatives and the working of the senses. They put together a 'classroom' in the exhibition venue with marginalized youth giving a performance of drumming on school desks. A *Dining Space Project* showing alternative modes of gardening, glass recycling, utensil-making and more, was put together and coordinated by Lifepatch, a collective from Yogyakarta.

Given the background of both the executive director and the artistic director, it is no surprise that a major part of the works in this biennale was focused on social issues and community involvement.

In this art, social documentation and research have thus been given a fair share in the biennale. This was also underlined with the work by *Ace House Collective*, an art laboratory studying popular culture. Setting up a mini museum-like presentation of objects symbolic of urban lifestyle and pop culture, they signified the impact of shifting trends taking place in today's Bandung area which is situated between Yogyakarta and Semarang.

Documenting and studying changing trends in society also featured in the work by the Malaysian artists group, *Lost Generation*. Their members interviewed citizens of Kuala Lumpur on the memories they held of the city and their visions for the city's future development. Photos of a variety of citizens, from all ethnic groups, were paired with recorded statements. At the Museum Seni Rupa dan Keramik, the video installation *Yang Tertinggal* by artist couple **Mella Jaarsma** and **Ninditiyo Adipurnomo** excelled. It was a perfect execution of portraits and interviews with member of the *Pusaka Tiga Suadara* ensemble, one of the remaining tanjidor groups in Eastern Jakarta, an almost extinct remnant of the historical music group from the colonial era. In the 18th century, Dutch slaves had to entertain their Dutch masters during dinner and parties with a mix of musical instruments, creating their typical Tanjidor genre.

How to manipulate make-believe was shown in **Agan Harahap's** photography which took gossip and issues of social significance to make photographs without actually using a camera. **Davy Linggar**, a photographer of note, manoeuvred his discontent within the designated space for his exhibition by visualizing an analogy to his house as a haven of rest and recuperation, far from the maddening crowds. To that end he displayed a mix of paintings,

photos and other objects in a closed glass cabinet which the public can only view from a distance.

The complicated diagrams on the wall by Canadian born philosophy professor and researcher/artist **Etienne Turpin** initially could have been bypassed by visitors, but Turpin sparked interest by relating them to the bird market and its 159 species of endangered and nearly extinct birds as a legacy of colonialism. During this period 8050 species of birds were exterminated and exported for samples in British museums. He suggested that violence still persists in the capture of birds and in keeping them in cages for human enjoyment.



Babi Badalov installation, Jakarta Biennale.

The Azerbaijan born **Babi Badalov**, who now resides in Paris, traced his nomadic path in exile with a huge poetic mural that flowed to an installation on the floor. Emotive text was artistically spread over the wall drawings, illustrating the fallacy of borders and discrimination in general.



Melati Suryodarmo performance, Jakarta Biennale.

Sweet Dreams Sweet, designed and contextualised by **Melati Suryodarmo**, was a stand-out performance by thirty female performers. They were clad in white, their faces and heads

hidden under white cloth, while moving in pairs, dipping their feet into buckets with blue coloured water, and staining their white stockings. The performance was weird and eerie and evoked a sense of some looming danger that uniformity would shift the landscape of plurality in Indonesian society. 'Diversity is slowly becoming alien', she says.

With enthusiastic public attention, including hundreds of students, the Jakarta Biennale can be regarded a well-deserved success. The creative spirit that permeated the 15th Jakarta Biennale shows how limited resources do not necessarily limit creativity. Yet with all the praise for creativity, one wonders whether such alternative presentation should be sustained in future biennales. The question of what a biennale should entail is still a hot issue of discussion internationally. Fumio Nanjo, the director of the Mori Museum, who is also a well respected curator and art critic, commented: “more polishing of some works would have given the event the distinction worthy of an international biennale”.

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Courtesy of IndoArtNow.