

Curator's Essay

Fools'lore: Folklore Reload

Sujud Dartanto

The *Biasa Art Space* building now stands with two gigantic sneakers on, the left one with the "Indie" label and the right one "Guerillas". The modern minimalist building looks funky with the trendy sneakers. Then there is the folly: the sneakers are tied to each other with their own laces. This is one among the works by Indieguerillas and it is called "Otot Kawat Tulang Besi" (literally meaning "Wire Muscles Iron Bones"). The phrase is the popular attribute of a superhero named Gatot Kaca of the Javanese *wayang*. Gatot Kaca is famous for his being a powerful warrior championing righteousness and busting evil.

Indieguerillas, founded in 1999, is a duet of creative artists from Yogyakarta. They are the couple Santi Ariestyowanti (31 yrs) the wife, and Dyatmiko "Miko" Bawono (33 yrs) the husband. The former has the Visual Communication Design background and the latter Interior Design. Both are alumni of The Faculty of Art of the Indonesian Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta (ISI Yogyakarta). In addition to their being known for their interest in folklores, Indieguerillas are also recognized for their proficiency at visual effects and inter-media experimentation in their works.

The Age of Madness: The Fools'lore Era

Madness seems common currently. You join in the madness of this era or get ridiculed. Is this an era of insanity indeed? A prediction of the present situation is given in a Javanese literary composition *Serat Kalatida*:

Amenangi Zaman Edan

Ewuh Aya Ing Pambudi

Melu Edan Ora Tahan

Yen Tan Melu Anglakoni

Boya Keduman Melik

Kaliren Wekasanipun

Dilalah Kersaning Allah

Begja - Begjane Kang Lali

Luwih Begja Kang Eling Lan Waspada

Living in the Age of Madness
Is indeed agonizing
Joining is unbearable
But not joining
Means getting nothing,
Eventually starving
Anyway, as God wills it does happen
As lucky as the ignorant can be
Luckier still are the sober and alert

—**Ronggowarsito**
(from *Serat Kalatida*, stanza 7)

This Babad *Fools'lore* (Fools'lore Chronicle) represents a narration that wants to present itself while examining our madness in an era that Ronggowarsito called “the age of madness”.

Babad Fools'lore

In this first solo exhibition by Indieguerillas I'd like to invite the audience to appreciate the artists' accomplished works and the way they have explored the Javanese wayang to result in its contemporary version. As I see it, their experimentation and exploration has brought into being something that resembles in itself a “babad”, or “chronicle” as invented by Indieguerillas: *babad fools'lore*. Why *Fools'lore*?

The title is meant to mark the way Indieguerillas develop their aesthetic concept and actual works that are distinctive. The structure of their works is based on the principle of “neither-nor” with regard to the issue of “oriental and occidental cultures”. This “non-dichotomy” principle demands us to enter a new kind of experience they offered to us. This is to say that the works are not just plain derivatives of western culture (“pop” art style), and at the same time not just reproductions eastern culture; instead, they become a unique category in this *babad Fools'lore*.

“*Fools'lore*” plays with the word “folklore”. The doubling of “o” and the replacement of “k” by “s” coupled with the added apostrophe makes a new ‘word’ of *fools'lore*. The word *fool* signifies someone who does actions of folly. Hence the theme of *fools'lore* is around the stories of fools. The sub-theme “Folklore Reload” implies the action of reloading the heritage of Indonesian folklores with their contemporary versions or contents. So here is *babad Fools'lore*, a series of stories that features various follies

effecting from culture shocks.

Both Santi and Miko's upbringing was by Javanese cultural values and modern values. This experience of having such specific identity provides a point of reflection for Indieguerillas in viewing their own and the next generation's cultural existence that they think still in want of some definite identity. In this regard, the *Fools'lore* project represents self-criticism concerning identity amid the coalescing global and local cultures.

Opening: The Expository Part of *Babad Fools'lore*

Applying the non-dichotomy principle, Indieguerillas decide to still use the interior element of the Javanese *wayang kulit* shadow puppet play known as *kayon* or *gunungan*. In the tradition of Javanese shadow puppet play, the *kayon* scene gives information of the setting of the story to be unfolding. The *kayon* itself represents the world and all the inhabitants. It can also be taken as representing the macrocosm.

Indieguerillas made their own versions of *kayon*. For this *babad Fools'lore* they invented five types of *kayon* each called *all is Fool of Love*, *Bark at the Fool moon*, *Fast Fools*, *Love Fools*, and *Fools'lore*. These *kayons* contain iconic figures and images of traditional and modern cultures for instance a drunk DJ, a farmer riding on a water buffalo's back listening to the music by Ipod, a solo organ player, the skateboard, rice wrapped in brown paper/banana leaves, traditional Indonesian-style ice cream, the *bakso* meatball, satay, *padang* rice, restaurants, the Petromax pressurized kerosene lamp, the woven-bamboo horse, log-drum sticks, and the *barongsai* male-lion puppet. These *kayons* of *babad Fools'lore* depict a "hodge-podge world" where symbols of oriental and occidental cultures cross.

The Oil Lamp: Wisdom of the Fool

Besides creating their own versions of *kayon*, Indieguerillas redesign the source of lighting for *babad Fools'lore*. Modifying the design of the traditional oil lamp known as *teplok*, they come up with four invented versions designed after the figures of *punakawan* servants comprising Gareng, Petruk, Bagong and Semar. These figures are given in their mini versions and with funny faces. With such designs these lamps remind us of the figure of the half-human and half-machine cyborg. However these lamps, made from wood and resin, are electrical. Combining the *teplok* oil lamp as a source of light and the *punakawan* figures famous as knights' servants and fools, Indieguerillas want to refer to the notion of the wisdom of the fool.

Screen-and-Melody of Fools'lore

In the tradition of wayang shadow play performance, melodies of gamelan music – known a *gending* – accompany the scenes. The screen gives the background of the unfolding story while providing the medium for the *wayang* puppets projecting their shadows and generating silhouette effects.

Indieguerillas work the above-mentioned elements to produce audio-visual screen-and-melody of a fashionable style. The material is projected onto the screen while a DJ is performing in the exhibition opening. This is the digital screen-and-melody of *Fools'lore*. Sound illustration and effects for the narrative episodes were done by DJ Midijunkie “Ari Wulu”, a DJ renowned for his experiments of alternative sounds. The composition is called “Banyan Tree”. Following are the stories of *Fools'lore* observable in paintings and objects on exhibition.

Story 1: The Character of Petruk in Various Stories

Indieguerillas highlight certain characters that include Petruk, a son to Semar and brother to Gareng and Bagong. The four of them appear in the *goro-goro* episode. A famous story that involves Petruk as the main character is *Petruk Becomes King*. The long-nosed and tall Petruk loses his head when reaching the top of the social and economic ladder as king. Indieguerillas make this imprudent character a central character in *babad Fools'lore*.

Notice “(Cholesterol Fueled) Mad Dancer” where Petruk is presented as running recklessly. A thin tin bucket with the label of Colonel Sanders – of the American Kentucky Fried Chicken fast food – nearly covers his whole head. Petruk wears a *Mod*-styled (referring to the English scooter subculture of the 70s). The stylish jacket evokes the image of the yuppies. In his left hand is a small-wooden-toy Petruk in the military uniform. A scooter replica hangs like the more common replicas of the traditional woven-bamboo horse.

There is still another small-sized Petruk, dressed as a cowboy. However, the head is that of a cowboy of the “Lucky Luke” comic-book version wearing the mask of Lucky Luke’s horse Jolly Jumper. That is how Indieguerillas represent the reality of “the KFC generation”, a “high-concentration cholesterol” generation. This is a generation in a trance – like the bamboo-horse dancers are – that consume even fragments of glass of any kinds.

Take a look also at “I aint goin’ nowhere, just shoot me”. There is a passport picture of Petruk in the neat costume of a white-collar worker. Petruk is happy with the western lifestyle. His body is attached to a Bambi, a doe, which is among Disneyland’s icons. Bambi’s head becomes sneakers with the figure of a mini Petruk in the costume of Mao’s

soldiers'. Bambi's tail turns to fire. The mini Petruk is waving a red flag. Below Petruk is the wave taken from the Japanese Hokusai's "Breaking Wave of Kanagawa". Indieguerillas mean the wave to symbolically refer to powerlessness in the face of globalization current. "We are dominated, yet happily", they said.

Petruk's silly behavior appears again in "Oregon is Godzilla!" Oregon is a state in USA where the main office of Nike is. Godzilla is the name of a monster in a Japanese fiction serial. Here in this work Indieguerillas exploit various attributes of popular culture. The Nike sneakers have eyes and a tongue licking out in the fashion of Mick Jagger the Rolling Stones' vocalist. Here Petruk is depicted as having a saw as his genitals, put upon a sort of a wheeled table. The sex organs of saw are being dragged by a mini Petruk dressed as an English aristocrat. Similar to "I aint goin' nowhere, just shoot me", this work is meant to depict the "happy victim" figure, someone culturally dominated but is happy with it.

Story 2: Dursasana the Legislative Member Candidate

Dursasana is an important antagonist in the Mahabharata epic as known in the Javanese *wayang* tradition. He has a sturdy body, a wide mouth, and is arrogant. Indieguerillas pick this particular character to represent entertainment celebrities running for legislative members. Indieguerillas doubt the capacities of such celebrities to deal with political matters once they are elected. This work is called "All Hail the Mannequin King".

Here in this painting Dursasana is formally and neatly dressed wearing a tie but also sneakers. His tongue is licking out. Notice also the mini figure making its way to slip underneath Dursasana's attire. Who knows what the figure is doing there. Anyway, this is simply absurd. And absurdity is perhaps what Indieguerillas want to highlight with regard to the recent phenomenon of entertainment celebrities suddenly turning politicians.

Story 3: Sarpakenaka Enticing Laksamana

Dewi Sarpakenaka is a female character of the Ramayana epic. She is powerful and her poisonous nails are her reliable weapons. Arrogance, fierceness, cruelty and greed are part of her nature. She is also unrestrainedly lustful. It is said that this polyandrous character has 100 husbands. In this story she transforms to a captivating lady to entice Laksamana in the forest of Dandaka. Laksamana turns her down. But she remains insistent to the point that Laksamana becomes so angry that he cuts off Sarpakenaka's nose.

The character inspired Indieguerillas to contextually feature it in terms of the tendency

among today's young people to demand prioritization ("Me First Generation"). We can see it represented in the work called "Skip You, Start Me". Sarpakenaka is rendered as wearing a bikini with a snake motif, and she has the tattoos showing a Japanese geisha and a dragon. She also has her "bunny hat" that Indiegurellas take as signifying lust. Sarpakenaka is nudging the figure of Laksmana in the form of a pet doll.

Story 4: Srikandi Practicing Arrow Shooting

Srikandi is a heroine from the Mahabharata epic. She excels in horse riding, using the bow and arrows and various other military skills. That makes this *wayang* character iconic to military organizations. Indieguerillas adopt this character, particularly of the episode "Srikandi Practicing Arrow Shooting". In "Srikandi and the Happy Paranoid", Indieguerillas fictionalize Srikandi encountering forest inhabitants but in their various contemporary appearances: Nike sneakers as heads, Hotei the fat, one of the seven Chinese gods of prosperity, Petruk the servant and fool, a weird-masked character from Tintin comics, and Ringo Starr, one of the members of the Beatles, a legendary group band. In this narrative episode Indieguerillas presents the image of Srikandi meeting various characters or icons from both eastern and western cultures.

Indieguerillas' Self-Criticism

In their "Heavy Make Up for the Amnesiac", Indieguerillas highlight the phenomenon of the "cultural amnesia" disease. This refers to the tendency of lapsing "memory of tradition" in today's life of Indonesian young people. The lapsing is marked the craze for fashionable western-styled beautification. The work features two figures in Adidas clothing with two tigers and a human figure wearing the mask of a Mexican wrestler Nacho libre.

In their "Punker Agraris" Indieguerillas narrate the adoption of punk fashion and attributes by Indonesian young people. The visualization involves two *wayang* figures one of which is about to consume cassava and the other busily taking pictures of him-/herself. The two figures are riding on the back of a tiger that remains caged on a T-shirt with the printed face of Queen "Elizabeth" whose eyes are crossed and with a text that runs "God Save the Queen". This logo is indeed the characteristic idiom of the English group band "Sex Pistol". The two figures ride on a tiger's back. "We believe that by utilizing local potency young people can take pride in local resources, strengthen their identity, growling aloud like a tiger instead of a kitten!" they said emphatically.

Also dealing with self-criticism, in "Hello Andy, this is indie", Indieguerillas "collaborate" with the legendary figure of American Pop-art Andy Warhol, their idol. But there is an irony here as they see themselves as Javanese painting artisans intimidated by

Andy Warhol's Pop-art style. In this work Petruk appears on the right while Aswatama, a figure from the antagonistic Kurawa party, is on the left. They are communicating by means of the traditional toy telephone. At one end is Warhol's iconic *Campbell soup* can and, at the other end, his famously iconic banana.

Indieguerillas Dissolve the Design-Art Dichotomy

Indieguerillas retain epitomes of their 'inborn nature' to be refilled with various issues familiar in popular culture that range from accessories, fashion, and through fictional characters. In this reloading action the most significant thing is the ecstatic playing with different symbols of the eastern and western cultures. Signs already re-composed are presented in their modified scales and volumes. This is in order to create dramatic points and surprising effects.

Indieguerillas' works open the door to a new game by denying the "design-art dichotomy" as a principle in aesthetics. As we know designers prioritize the needs and interests of "others" and render their own tastes secondary. But their art lies just there. It is the art of negotiating between a designer's ideal wish and the client's. As for "artists", they position their personal experience as the very "source of inspiration".

Indieguerillas dissolve the dichotomy between design and art by means of their experimentation in creative projects. There is symbiosis in the relationship between Santi and Miko. Both of them have the educational background of designing to start with. Santi studied Visual Communication Design and Miko Interior Design – two different branches of the same trunk.

The collaboration between the two fields of interest has generated a unique technique in dealing with their expressive objects. Santi will deal with the aspect of visual communication while Miko will be considering the positioning of expressive objects in the two- and three-dimensional layouts. Their meeting point is on the challenge to create unusual visual effects.

Indieguerillas' Digital Workshop and Ideology

Indieguerillas work with support tools from their "digital workshop". They first make designs for works with the help of graphics software. The next step is projecting the designs. This makes it easier for them to check the precision of forms, colors and compositions. Then they proceed with accentuating lines and coloring that are done manually. They admitted that there is still the chance to be flexible with their designs when they are directly face-to-face with objects and canvas without the mediation of the computer's monitor. They can pour out colors and making visual changes and additions directly. The process enables them to exercise immediate control over their objects.

For their references they download information from the Internet. Their reading goes beyond the subject matters connected with art and design. It includes horoscope, novels and, especially, wayang stories. They need them to help extend and enrich their works.

Unlike most full-time artists, they do with they do by a “play and work” approach. “Play” implies that they can make new technical experiments they want. At times Santi will be making graphics while Miko plays the guitar or makes musical composition on the computer. “Play” sometimes shifts to “work” when out of “play” comes up a productive activity like the indie magazine *Outmagz* and the group band *Stereovilla* with the kind of music they call “rotten pop”.

Indieguerillas and Folklore (Re)creation

Javanese *wayang* imparts moral teachings via heroic through silly stories. The latter have the *punakawan* servants and fools as main characters. While such silly stories of *punakawan* characters are comical, some experts believe that those stories serve to give ethical guidance and to provide a means of reflection.

Wayang stories interest Indieguerillas. Given their Javanese background, it is not hard for Indieguerillas to comprehend *wayang* narratives. In the next development they became critical about how Indonesian folklores increasingly loses their attractiveness to young people. Young people cannot stand to watch *wayang* shadow puppet performances that last many hours. Besides, to comprehend and properly appreciate *wayang* shadow puppet performance people need familiarity with the language, dialects and vocabularies used in the narration and dialogs. They also see the images of traditional *wayang* puppets are so out-of-date in comparison with those presented by comic strips and animation films from the west and Japan. That explains why while adopting *wayang* idioms they introduce certain (re)creation in terms of more popular visualization and verbalization; the aim is to make *wayang* acceptable to the young generation.

Celebrating Glocalization

Indieguerillas’ concern for the existence of local cultures in the form of inherited folklores amid the changing times drive them to (re)create the *wayang* art. Their pursuit reflects the way they appropriate signs known to global and local cultures. This provides their creative strategy in experiencing cultural *glocalization*.

Globalization has indeed shaped a new brand of culture in terms of both contents and forms. What happens in Milan, London, Paris, and New York will soon appear and be recognized in other places. In this sense, globalization gives birth to paradoxes and

ambivalence. In the negative perspective globalization threatens localness that is ever being eroded to diminish. Yet the positive perspective welcomes globalization as a cultural fiesta. Indieguerillas seize the opportunity to live a global-local culture that they celebrate as the wellspring of unlimited inspirations.

They don't view globalization as a threat and a reason to worry. They take *glocality* as part of reality that productively contributes to the arrangement of a new form of culture. Japan and its "Japanese pop" side by side with the traditional culture produce a new brand of culture.

Indieguerillas amid the Era's Changing Taste

Early 1995 seen as an important time for the emergence of an indie generation while Indonesia was going through economic, political and social turbulences leading to the collapse of the New Order in 1998. It was the time that saw shifting tastes in the lifestyle of young people in Yogyakarta. The shift was marked by the development of different kinds of music such as *indiepop*, *grunge*, *electronic* coupled with the growth of alternative media like *Outmagz* and *Blank Magazine*, alternative art exhibition spaces like *Benda Art Space*, *MES 56*, alternative art movements that include *Apotik Komik* group, and *Taring Padi* for example, alternative shops or 'distros' like *Whatever*, *Mailbox* and *Slackers*, as well as the emergence of alternative study groups like *Kunci Cultural Studies* and *On/Off* that specializes in literature.

As a group or institution Indieguerillas was born in this era of shifting tastes and ways. This group contributes to the shaping of the indie and young people's culture, particularly in terms of graphics. Aside from that, Miko was involved in the founding of two bands, the legendary I Hate Mondays and Stereovilla where he was the bassist. These bands color the scene of indie music in Yogyakarta together with *Steak Daging Kacang Ico*, *Shaggy Dog*, *Melancholic Bitch*, *Anggis Luka*, *Bagaikan*, and some others.

The emergence of Indieguerillas was flanked by the growth and development of alternative communities. They include, for instance, the *indiepop* community that call themselves "common-people" that often met at the front yard of the Gadjah Mada University students center, the comic-book community of *Daging Tumbuh* – a community of alternative comics led by Eko Nugroho who is also known as a contemporary artist. The esthetic taste of Indieguerillas was shaped by such zeitgeist.

The use of alternative media and technology provides a significant factor in the shaping of the "indie culture". In turn, this symbolic and cultural capital leads to the emergence of

an esthetic principle that no longer capitalizes on individual interior experience but on exterior or popular experience.

Next, this popular esthetics builds its own social world. The creative actors of this indie world form various sub-societies. They develop the spirit of sharing among them, they support each other, and form groups along different tendencies in terms of techniques and media. This empathy enables them – bound by solidarity regarding taste – to maintain their common ‘ideology’.

The Neither-East-Nor-West Position

In today’s popular culture signs traverse easily. This enables agents to do “cut and paste”. In this respect, another work by Indieguerillas, entitled “Dasamuka”, is an illustration. They take the face of KISS’ vocalist of Gene Simmons, the figure of Marilyn Manson, the clown masks of the members of the *Slipknot* – Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees and Hannibal Lecter – and combine them all to make a new figuration of Dasamuka from the Ramayana epic. As the result, Dasamuka becomes an ambiguous sign in the context of “east-west” relationship. No ‘authentically west’ as well as ‘authentically east’ left, the ‘cut and paste’ strategy disrupts the previously established meanings of signs.

Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as “realities” to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence...What can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not the other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom...it is the possibility of difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic system. Someday we must write the history of our own obscurity—manifest the destiny of our narcissism.

—Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang.1982) as quoted by Dick Hebdige in the catalog of Takashi Murakami’s exhibition (2008-2009)

This collage of signs generates a new composition as the effect of the arbitrary mixing of various signs. These juxtaposed signs produce a third text beyond the dichotomy of ‘occident-orient’ texts. A third text that takes us to see how this non-dichotomous generation is writing its own history.

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