

# Apotik Komik are Going to Paint the Town **Red** and **blue** and **green** and **brown** and **yellow** and black and white and . . . .

by Michelle Chin

Apotik Komik ("Comic Pharmacy") was founded in 1997. Currently it is run by three artists - Arie Diyanto, [Bambang Toko Witjaksono](#) and Samuel Indratma; writer Ade Tanesia; and cultural observer, Mie Cornoedus. Since 1995, they have printed limited-edition art comics such as the serials *Komik Seni* (Art Comic), *Komik Underground* (Underground Comic), *Core Comic* and *Komik Haram* (Forbidden Comic). *Komik Ampyang* was an art comic serial created to promote a local brand of peanut candy: a classic case of today's snack package becoming the collector's item of the future.

The group's collaborative art works have been included in exhibitions such as *Diobok-Obok, Continuities and Contingencies, South East Asia Art Today* at Singapore Art Museum in 1999; *AWAS: Recent Art from Indonesia*, a travelling exhibition organised by Cemeti Art Foundation which toured Indonesia, Australia, Japan, Holland and Germany from 1999 to 2001; and the travelling exhibition *36 Ideas from Asia* which was shown in London, Zurich, Berlin and Paris in 2002. In 2000 Frank & Lee Atelier in Singapore held an exhibition titled *4 Members of Apotik Komik* showing works by Arie Diyanto, Bambang Toko Witjaksono, Samuel Indratma and Popok Tri Wahyudi.

Apotik Komik's major mission is to encourage art activities in the public spaces of various Indonesian cities. Recognising the open nature of public space, Apotik Komik aims to set up interactive public art projects in collaboration with community members of these cities. This is easier said than done. For more than three decades, public space in Indonesia has been almost totally controlled by the state. In particular, during the New Order (1966-1998), public space was used for state propaganda: billboards and posters proclaimed the necessity of family planning ("*Dua Anak Cukup*") and Suharto's achievements as the "Father of Development". During the period of Reformasi (reformation) from 1998 to the present, public space has become the site for the propagandistic slogans of the numerous social and political organisations which sprang up after the fall of the Suharto regime. The result is that in Indonesia, public space is seen as being "wild" and dangerous.

"Many experts believe that one way of making a community feel at ease in their environment is by placing art in public spaces. It is also believed that art can strengthen civic identity and produce a feeling a civic pride in the hearts of urban dwellers," says Bambang Toko Witjaksono. "At the very least, the art will provoke discussion, comment, praise or criticism. We want to encourage the practice of creating and displaying art in public space, turning the city into a huge venue where art can be seen and enjoyed by the general community," says Arie Diyanto. "The city's extensive walls are public spaces available for artistic statement, immediately accessible to those passing by. We believe that the placement of art in public space will inspire dialogue in Jogjakarta's multicultural community. Dialogue is the path to understanding, interaction and trust," adds Samuel Indratma.

## **Melayang (Flying), 1997**

In 1997, Apotik Komik organised their first exhibition in Nitiprayan, Jogja. The exhibition took place on the day of the 1997 general election. The timing of this was daring: prior to the election, the authorities had embarked on a series of measures against student activities and

had prohibited one event because of its association with the outlawed *PRD* (Democratic People's Party). The theme of the exhibition was *Melayang* (Flying), and it covered 700 meters of walls in the Nitiprayan area. The artists who participated in this exhibition were Samuel Indratma, Bambang Toko Witjaksono, Arie Diyanto, Popok Tri Wahyudi, Yosep Kristanto, Sekar Jatiningrum, Iwan Wijono, M Sofwan Zarkasi, S. Pahlevi, Ma'arif, Didik Oseng and German artist Anna Blume. The exhibition was documented by Eko Birowo and J. Ulis, students at the Faculty of Documentary Media, ISI Yogyakarta. All the exhibition expenses were shared by the artists, and additional funding was contributed by [Sakrip](#), a student at the Sculpture Department, ISI Yogyakarta who had just happened to receive a commission, and Ade Tanesia who was then the editor of the magazine, [aikon!].

This exhibition was very successful. The local community reacted with enthusiasm and the exhibition received coverage from a number of private television companies (RCTI, SCTV and Anteve) as well as the national broadcast TVRI, and several printed media - *BERNAS*, *Kedaulatan Rakyat* dailies and *Panji Masyarakat* magazine. Apotik Komik's first exhibition proved that there was an alternative low-budget method of exhibiting which bypassed the conventional gallery system: a collaboration project sharing costs with friends in the art community.

### **Sakit Berlanjut (Ongoing Sickness), 1999**

In July 1999, Apotik Komik held an outdoor exhibition *Sakit Berlanjut* (Ongoing Sickness) in four locations around Jogja. Large figures were created with corrugated cardboard which was cut, pasted and painted with ink. The artists nailed hundreds of these two- and three-dimensional figures on the walls around the city of Jogja, and they actually announced with a press release that their aim was that "everyone can be a collector", encouraging passers-by to take the figures off the walls, and hang them in their own homes. As it turned out, many people did take this opportunity to become an art collector! The exhibition gave a new meaning to "public art" because the artists went as far as creating art works which could be taken off the exhibition venue walls, free of charge. With this event, Apotik Komik showed their commitment to the struggle for alternative space other than art galleries. Their preference was for outdoor exhibitions, and they cherished a dream of using empty walls in Jogja (and other cities) to paint on.

### **Apotik Komik Public Gallery, 2001**

Apotik Komik Public Gallery opened in August 2001. Its life-span was deliberately planned to be only one year. It is a fascinating alternative space, set up in such a way that encourages a reinterpretation of the whole concept and definition of the word "gallery". Apotik Komik Public Gallery has totally overturned the normal assumption that a gallery is a closed space in which art works are exhibited and kept safely locked up at night. The gallery is simply a wall located on the corner of Jalan Langenarjan Lor and Jalan Gamelan in Jogjakarta. The wall, measuring 2.28 meters high by 11.23 meters wide, is in fact the backing material onto which art works are created. Young Jogja-based artists Eko Nugroho, Narpati Awangga, Venzha, Farhan, [I Made Aswino Aji](#) and Soni Irawan have exhibited so far. Their mural paintings are clearly of a temporary nature: when an exhibition is over, the wall is painted over, and a new art work is created on the wall. For this reason, documentation is important to "immortalise" the temporary art works which are painted onto the wall of this public gallery.

The members of Apotik Komik are seriously committed to creating a dynamic interaction and dialogue between artists and the general public through the art works they exhibit at this public gallery. They do not simply talk about "getting closer to the general public" - they are really interacting with the local community which has been isolated from art for so long. The gallery has been very well accepted by the neighbours, many of whom have offered their own walls as extensions to the gallery: it seems that many of the neighbours wish that the Apotik Komik Public Gallery could extend along the walls of the whole street.

The gallery is truly an alternative exhibition space, readily accessible to the general public - becak drivers, ice sellers, office workers, mothers, children, unemployed youth. All who pass by on the street become viewers of the exhibitions at Apotik Komik, a gallery that is "open to the public at all times".

### **City Mural Project "Sama-Sama", 2002**

In August 2002, Apotik Komik organised a City Mural Project titled *Sama-Sama* ("Together") in various locations around Jogja. In contrast to their previous yearnings for the subversive possibilities of spray-painting graffiti on surfaces around the city without permission, this time they went through all the bureaucratic red tape to actually obtain government permits to paint wall murals in these locations. One can imagine how un-comic this must have been: even if Indonesia is in the "reformation" period, getting permits from government offices is still only as much fun as it used to be in the old days. Some things never change.

Ten artists joined the City Mural Project - Arie Diyanto, Arya Panjalu, Bambang Toko Witjaksono, Eko Nugroho, Ira, Midori Hirota, Nano Warsono, Samuel Indratma, Sekar Jatiningrum and Yosep Kristanto. Apotik Komik also involved local children to participate in painting the murals at each location. They used an astounding 1,000 litres of paint to create the colossal murals which in total cover hundreds of square meters.

For this project, Apotik Komik worked in co-operation with various organisations including the Jogja Heritage Society, INSIST, Via Via, Antena Project, the Architecture Faculty and Pusat Studi Lingkungan Hidup of Gajah Mada University, Anak Wayang Indonesia and YSIK. Before starting to actually paint the murals, they held a workshop and discussion at the end of July, and from 14-24 September 2002 there will be a photography exhibition at Museum Perjuangan, Jogjakarta showing the works of 10 photographers from the RUANG MES 56 artists' community who documented the entire all mural project. While the mural paintings may last for a year or so, it was vital that the project be well-documented.

Apotik Komik hope that *Sama-Sama* will be a pilot project for the city of Jogjakarta and other cities in Indonesia. Samuel Indratma says, "Jogja is full of artists, but all their works are in their studios. It would be better if their paintings are displayed in public space. And if there is more experimental work displayed in public it might trigger the public's ideas about visual art in general. We hope that people will start to realise that public space actually belongs to the people of the city."

---

While it is all very well for politicians and government officials to state that they want to "encourage a greater appreciation of the arts amongst the general public", the members of Apotik Komik are actually making good progress towards achieving this through their various public art projects. Perhaps the key to their success so far is that they have settled on the appropriate strategy or "recipe" with their choice of location for exhibitions and other art events (public space) and genre (comic-strip and graffiti-style paintings) topped with a spicy sauce of subject matter that is relevant and contemporary. The secret ingredient ensuring the success of this recipe is a very generous pinch of humour.

Many Indonesians are intimidated by art galleries and museums and feel embarrassed to enter these seemingly awe-inspiring buildings, afraid that they will be refused admittance by the security guard at the front entrance. Apotik Komik realise that one way of enabling the public easier access to art is by using public spaces, walls, buildings, fences and other outdoor venues. In Indonesia it is a better strategy to take art to the public than to attempt coaxing the public into art galleries and museums.

Apotik Komik have chosen the narrative form of comic strips because this style is familiar to many people, and the art is thus more easily accessible to the general public. Comic-strip style and pseudo-graffiti paintings are direct in their message and humorous. Graffiti-style works are useful channels for contemporary thoughts and ideas, providing a visual comment on the increasingly chaotic social, cultural and economic situation.

Apotik Komik art works comment on the contemporary reality of living in Indonesia, with all its positive and negative aspects. Since 1998 there has been an increase in the number of contemporary art works which show us a more critical view of Indonesia with typical subject matter focussing on social and political comment: corruption, nepotism, inefficient government, amoral bureaucrats, poverty, religious conflict and the failure of democracy in Indonesia.

Apotik Komik have also hit on the right formula to familiarise the public with art by using a particular brand of surrealistic humour. Jogjakartans in particular are no strangers to the funny, the absurd, the frightening, the familiar, the modern, the traditional, the serious and the ridiculous interacting in the same space. They see it every day on the streets of Jogja where buses, trucks, cars, army vehicles, motorbikes, horse carts, *becak*, bicycles and pedestrians all jostle along the roads together; *jamu* sellers set up stalls in front of Kentucky Fried Chicken stores; parabola satellite dishes rear their heads in dusty, dirty *kampung*; young women, complete with laptop computer and mobile telephone, travel to work in a *becak*. If the artworks created by the Apotik Komik artists seem bizarre, one only need to look around the city of Jogja to see the social chaos, confusion and contradictions which inspire these works. The humour, parody and twisted logic of daily life, television cartoon serials, commercials, electronic media and popular slang all feed into their works which are absurdist, carefree, non-narrative representations and parodies of "serious" art.

Apotik Komik often mocks the art scene itself: writers, curators, collectors, viewers, artists and so on. One of the funniest performances I have seen in years was a demonstration of Samuel Indratma's *Wayang Kaotik* which depicted a young artist bowing and scraping to one of the curators of Jakarta's National Gallery in the hopes of having his exhibition proposal accepted. With one simple puppet created from an empty cigarette packet, Samuel played the parts of the God-like curator ("Are you a graduate of an art institution? Have you ever had a solo exhibition?") and a trembling, nervous, young artist ("No, no . . . I am self-educated, progressive, innovative and I have a very long CV"). While the artist grovelled on the ground below, the curator sat high above on the roof of the "National Gallery" (this was a set constructed from a cardboard box on which the Japanese electronics company logo was still clearly visible). Samuel played the parts in rapid succession - his amazingly expressive, single puppet dangling from a string which was tied to a thin wooden rod.

So, you might be thinking, how do these artists actually live? Do they spend all their time painting walls? Transforming empty cigarette packets into puppets? (yeah, well . . . they actually do spend a lot of time doing these things, and they also like to stay up very late every night too). But if they are creating art works on public walls, they can't very well sell them, can they? (unless of course the buyer is prepared to buy the land that the wall is on). . . . You'll be relieved to know that Arie, Bambang and Samuel don't spend all their time using the walls of Jogjakarta and other cities to paint on. They also paint on conventional materials like paper and canvas, and they are always very willing to sell those paintings - and I really want to buy that puppet!!!

*Michelle Chin is a writer, translator and art consultant based in Jogjakarta.*

\* for locations around Jogja where you can see the Sama-Sama City Mural Project paintings and for further information about events and exhibitions to be held by Apotik Komik in September

2002, please contact Ade Tanesia or Samuel Indratma at:

Apotik Komik

Jl. Langenarjan Lor no. 29

Jogjakarta 55131 Indonesia

T: +62 (0)274 372365

E: ap\_komik2002@yahoo.com

[published in *Latitudes*, Vol. 20, September 2002]