

Mella Jaarsma: Moments like this...

Lisa Byrne

Mella Jaarsma is no witness to silence. Dutch-born with a now strong Indonesian cadence, Jaarsma uses the ambivalence of her coalesced Indonesian/Dutch identity as the foundation for a poignant conceptual and artistic investigation of contemporary Indonesian identity politics. Without reducing this knowledge to a mere recording, her approach to reading Indonesian culture, as a full time resident since 1984, comes from situating oneself in the real activity of the society. Jaarsma's experiences stem from a practical relation to contemporary Indonesian culture. With a preoccupied, active presence in the racial politics of Indonesia, Jaarsma is familiar with that which imposes most on racial identification. With its urgencies, its things to be done, said and made, she along with many contemporary Indonesian artists, formulates a contingent, artistic, motivated social commentary. This commentary locates alternative actions and realities for and within contemporary Indonesian society:

By choosing to live within a totally different culture, after having grown up in the Netherlands, I became more aware of the values and norms of my own cultural background. This process made me conscious of differences between cultures and also taught me how to identify these differences. What we consider to be reality comes to us by means of contrasts in experiences. My work focuses on ideas about our own existence in a certain place in a particular world.¹

Jaarsma's articulation of racial politics specifically involves unique artistic endeavours that speak both to the culturally inculcated and to those less familiar with the reality of a multi-ethnic Indonesia. Whilst Jaarsma makes no grand claims to a generalist indigenous cultural experience, the politic itself does have some shared challenges for any multi-ethnic community. This affords her artistic activities an immediacy beyond their obvious context. It is the ability of works such as *Hi inlander (Hello Native)* (1998-99), shown at the Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, in 1999 to raise questions like: 'What does it mean to walk around in another's skin, to see

through their eyes, to make food with their own hands? To eat their food and to become therefore, like them? and more acutely what does it feel like to live in another's body? And does a different body make a different person?' As Julie Ewington suggests, such questions locate a broad and a specific type of negotiation of social location and importantly the language and activity of difference in a multi-racial society.²

This type of social questioning came to the forefront in post-Suharto Indonesia. With a new-found freedom of expression, artists like Jaarsma found themselves in the middle of an economic and political crisis and began to redefine their positions. Jaarsma's position as a Dutch born Indonesian resident acknowledges her 'existence on a certain spot in this world. The paintings, photographs, installations and performances made during the last years basically are meant to invite people to consider where they are placed. On one side every person has to deal with very personal experiences which come to us by our family background, given possibilities and choices. On the other side, experiences are made by general circumstances (culturally, politically and socially).³

In identifying key cultural codes and practices fundamental to all societies such as cooking, eating, and dress, Jaarsma infiltrates the everyday life and encounters of people. Utilising familiar yet culturally loaded activities such as these she temporarily destabilises the established modes of behaviour in street performances that mesh differing ethnic references in performative interventions. Events such as cooking frog legs in the streets of Yogyakarta by seven foreign people, defy certain cultural traditions in order to open up discussions about racism. For Muslims, any meat not *halal* (clean) is taboo. Frog legs are Chinese food and therefore not strictly speaking allowed with the Muslim diet. In this performance Jaarsma has different people, with differing customs, cooking foods that they are not allowed to consume. This active presence in the world of racial relations is informed by her own multi-racial family. Jaarsma confronts the negotiation of a hybrid



Mella Jaarsma, *The warrior*, 2003 (detail), used military clothes and seaweed. Image courtesy the artist.

family life within a society that has an imposing traditional background and, as she states, a rather new capitalist consumer culture and political tension. It is her specific experience of Indonesia that informs what is at heart a considered humanist comparative analysis of cultural experiences.

Jaarsma's mode of social inquiry through performance is contrived for very specific ends. Choosing fluid, almost totally ephemeral styles of interventionist engagement with her audience, be it in the public realm or that of a gallery environment, little beyond the costumes or a video record remains after the act. It is the dynamic raised in the direct experience of these performances that motivates the greatest sense of personage, place and reality for the audience. Arguably, it is their short-lived, yet piqued intervention in established social mores that affords their motivating efficacy. Jaarsma recounts an experience with an Aboriginal model at the 1999 Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane where, upon meeting her model Rodney, a Dutch conversation ensued. It came about that Rodney was from the Stolen Generation of indigenous children and was given to a Dutch immigrant family and upon their return to live in the Netherlands a little while later, they took him with them. As Jaarsma remarks, 'Isn't it a moment of exchange like this that I had made the artwork for?'⁴

In *SARA-swati 1 and 11*, made not long after the racial riots of 1998, Jaarsma drew on the warrior princess Saraswati from the Mahabharata story and combined this with a purposeful linguistic double entendre SARA, the abbreviation used in Indonesian language meaning Suku - Agama - Ras (Tribe - Religion - Race).⁵ In this performance Jaarsma dresses her subject in a veil made of dried banana tree-trunk. The veil is made so that different parts of the body are shown, these are her common expressive tools, eyes, hands, feet. Protruding from the banana tree-trunk veil are pointing fingers. These fingers despite the Indonesian cultural taboo of pointing at someone, (something Jaarsma is very aware of), directly implicate the audience in a compelling exchange of identity politics. With this action the artist steadfastly disavows any neutralised viewing of the veiled subject. Negating any potential as a spectacle, the viewer is the watched, inasmuch as the entire

audience is drawn into participating in the performance.

Whether one describes Jaarsma's veils worn by her performers as skins, cloaks, or *hijab* (a Muslim girl's veil) their covering of the bodily surface is a clever vehicle of social inscription. These cloaks worn by performers first and foremost add to the complexity of identity rather than attempting to strip away at identity in the fraught pursuit of some essential inner subjectivity or originary status. Jaarsma rather astutely steers clear of this trap. Instead she revisits and remakes these cloaks for different performances in different places with different audiences. In using social behaviour as a point of subversion through their very traditional, enculturated or engendered contexts, Jaarsma's skins point to the specificity of different cultural experiences. This was keenly evident in two works *Show me the Truth* (1997) and *SARA-Swati I and II*. In the former work Jaarsma had her audience step into footprints of another person in a main street of Yogyakarta, rather than wear another's cloak/skin as is the case with the latter.

*Everyone who confronts my work is coming at it from different backgrounds and cultures, dealing with highly personal sets of taboos and therefore experiencing the work in different ways. I want my work to relate to these specific audiences, dealing with some of their specific taboos. This takes great sensitivity, and I try to find ways to open up dialogue.*⁶

For *Witnessing to Silence* at Canberra Contemporary Art Space, as part of the ANU Humanities Research Centre project 'Art and Human Rights', Jaarsma will make three new video performances and three new costumes whilst in residence. These new works will feature hunting, killing, feeding and healing. The first is a military costume worn by a performer made from camouflage fabric and seaweed; the second a feeding costume made from dried inkfish and squids, and the third a healing costume, made of traditional medicines such as dried seahorse, seadragons, with plant materials. The bottom of each costume will hang into a wok and a soup will be cooked and served at the opening to the audience and the people wearing the costume.



Mella Jaarsma, *The healer*, 2003, seahorse and other natural medicines. Images courtesy the artist.

The Indonesian measure of Mella Jaarsma's artistic activity over the last several years is a fertile basis for her interest in contemporary identity politics. What she so expertly conveys is the need for people to actively consider the world that surrounds them, for a phenomenological reality that incorporates racial tolerance, and encourages the value of diversity.

Jaarsma attempts this social endeavour through the experiences of her immediate surroundings and presents this by way of invested performative acts that shorten the distance between the audience and the artwork. Fully aware that art cannot change the world, Jaarsma teases her participants into potentially conflicting acts that implicate them in altering their reality, even if it is just for a moment in time.

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¹ Mella Jaarsma in *Moral Pointers*, Exhibition Catalogue, Lontar Gallery, Jakarta, 2002, p. 8.

² Julie Ewington, 'The problem of location', in Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb (eds.), *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane 1999, p. 62.

³ Mella Jaarsma artist statement Asia-Pacific Triennial 1999.

http://www.apt3.net/apt3/artists/artist_bio/mella_Jaarsma_a.htm.

⁴ Mella Jaarsma in *Retrospection* Part I.

<http://www.universe-in-universe.de/woven-maze/jaarsma/statement1.html>.

⁵ Importantly, as Julie Ewington points out in 'The problem of location', *op. cit.*, the word 'footprints' is accurately stated as *Pribumi*. This literally means son of the soil, therefore indigenous person. The word was used during the riots of May 1998 in Indonesian cities to protect houses and shops from attack by the mobs, often as part of the phrase *Muslim pribumi asli* – ie Islamic, indigenous, original. Jaarsma states that conflicts arising from SARA appear frequently in the current affairs of Indonesia.

⁶ Mella Jaarsma in *Moral Pointers*, *op. cit.*, p. 10-11.