

A look at Jogja Biennale X 2009: Jogja Jamming: Gerakan Arsip Seni Rupa



Edi Prabandono, Mohon Doa Restu, Mixed Media, 2009

I spent eleven weeks holed-up in my studio in Jogjakarta preparing for Jogja Biennale X 2009. Though a comparatively small city, Jogja has a 70 year-old art school; a huge industry of artist-friendly wood, clay, and metal workers; and is home to approximately seventy percent of Indonesia's contemporary artists. But it was the communalism of a hometown event, mixed in with the competitiveness of artists eager to show up their peers — either as participants or as hecklers — that would make the biennale the barrage of activity worthy of the isolation leading up to it.

Since 1988 the state-led institution *Taman Budaya Yogyakarta* (TBY), has performed rotational selections of biennale curators from the country's limited number of curatorial regimes. This 10th biennale proved particularly controversial due to, amongst other things, a curatorial coup de tat enacted by several art activists, numerous and established enough to legitimise the side-lining of Wahyudin, the sole curator selected by TBY. The result was, ironically enough, a biennale that weighed heavily on a philosophy of 'inclusion', run by a curatorial team that set up a series of divergent projects in four indoor locations throughout the city.



Kelompok Kowemono, Memedi Mall (Ghost of the Mall), Mixed Media, 2009

One project that kept to the biennale's originally proposed theme *Gerakan Arsip Seni Rupa* (Visual Art Archive Movement), was the Archive Exhibition Series from the Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA) collection. Part of this series was a 21-year retrospective of Jogja Biennale, meticulously displayed at the Dutch colonial buildings in downtown Jogja, which now houses Bank Indonesia. With its own on-site curators — IVAA director Farah Wardani and writer Grace Samboh — this project provided a historical outline of each biennale, and the ensuing resistance by artists to its rules and regulations, resulting in its evolution from a strictly regulated painting show to an event that encapsulates the myriad of Indonesian contemporary art forms. In hindsight, this project put Jogja Biennale X's curatorial kup into a historical context of artists baulking at biennale establishment to create their own event. However this project also showed how fraught such pioneering can get, as it stood seamlessly amidst the discombobulated curatorial style of the rest of the biennale.

The Jogja National Museum also housed a biennale exhibition dedicated to a history of Jogja artists' groups, from the highly politicised groups of the 1960s and 70s, to groups that pioneered revolutions in medium (rather than content) of the present day. The biennale's other venues — TBY gallery and privately-owned Sangkring Art Space — housed a series of disconnected artworks (including yours truly's), which were more a reflection of the thematically bereft curating that has colonised the Jogja art scene in recent years.



Anton Win feat. Angel, (Untitled), 2009

It was only after I moved to Jogja in 2002 that I was emboldened to make work with medium in which I had no training, as I was frequently confronted with eye-opening exhibitions that had little or nothing to do with commercialism. By the time of this biennale in 2009, Jogja had just wound down from a 3-year boom in the art market that had resulted in slew of jual lambak exhibitions, housed in both commercial and non-commercial spaces. The last Jogja Biennale 2007 was not only curated in this commercialised style, but staged an auction of its works, capitalising on the frenzied buying that marked that time. As artists went from owning last-legs motorbikes to cars virtually overnight, a significant number of young artists abandoned their experimental practice for a more commodifiable brush and size-regulated canvas. Even amongst those who benefited, the boom was silently seen as a blight on Jogjakarta's image of pioneering experimentalism in contemporary Indonesian art.

It was this, I think, that lay at the heart of the Jogja Biennale X's most controversial project — *Public on the Move* — spearheaded by one of its post-official curators, Samuel Indratma (Sam). *Public on the Move* was a series of artworks displayed throughout Jogja's inner and surrounding city's public spaces. They were primarily sculptural, but also included paintings, wall and sidewalk murals, and video works.



Firman Djamil, *Tidak Sapu*, Mixed Media, 2009

Sam's party line was that *Public on the Move* developed out of a self-concocted philosophy called jamming, which ended up being the mantra-like theme of the entire biennale. The term was used so frequently and in any context that it came dangerously close to meaning anything. But according to Sam, jamming was the process by which a project is organised using "local wisdom" or "kampung style" methods. By this Sam makes reference to neighbourhood activities found in *Rukun Tetangga* or RT, a grouping of households introduced in both Malaysia and Indonesia during the Japanese occupation, which is still used in Jogja primarily as a system of surveillance. Jamming refers to the modes of grouping and communication that either drive, or result from, these neighbourhood activities. In my kampung this would mean a lot of man-gossip and mutual monitoring. To an average Kuala Lumpurite this would mean an excess in small talk, one too many revolutions around a subject, and a general waste of time. But the key to Sam's jamming – eventually Samming – was achieving familiarity through (face) time, and generating 'natural' working relationships through the strengthening of bonds, which Sam claimed was his means of discussing, developing, and resolving *Public on the Move*.

Now anyone familiar with this form of kampung communication would be aware of a slight flaw with regards to curating – a reticence towards rejection. I've chased many geese around Jogja as a result of someone not being able to say, 'no I can't do that', or 'no I don't know where that is'. Outright rejection on the local level is considered to most as rude, and there is much wobbling involved in avoiding it. Within a curatorial context the absence of rejection does diminish the responsibility of selection. The diversity of sculptural work in *Public on the Move* ranged from a struggle to mimic American sculptors of the 60s; to the batik-fication of capitalist icons; to a regurgitation of Javanese mythological roundabout monuments; to enlarged Christmas tree decorations. In fact enlarging objects was a tool used by many *Public on the Move* artists in dealing with public space. Interviews with other biennale committee members revealed that selections for *Public On the Move* were based primarily on who met the deadline, and any round-the-corner rejections were done either in the name of public decency or against works that compromised public safety.



As I sat chewing a straw at the TBY cafe after being stood up by Sam in my second attempt to interview him, I saw a small sticker dotted around the TBY cafe, which read “*Biennale Sudah Dekat, Semua Dapat Tempat*” (The Biennale is Getting Closer, Everyone Will Get a Place). I then realised this inclusionary selection process was no philosophical accident. By including a range of artists that were neither contemporary nor contemporarily commercial, *Public on the Move* was making a dig not only at the commercialism that had overrun the art scene, but also at the 2007 biennale.

However by rejecting current institutional methods of selecting artists, *Public on the Move* had inadvertently rejected the notion of biennale as well. Apart from the web-definition “international manifestation of contemporary art”, biennales are a tricky balance between curator and artist putting the bestest-most-current work forward, and adhering to the biennale’s particular identity, which generally based on the social or historical currents of its city. *Public on the Move* did neither. Ironically, *Public on the Move*’s inclusion could only articulate what it rejected – gallery space, institution, hierarchy, foreign methods — but could not articulate an identity that worked for this biennale — a benang merah that tied the public works to each other, or to the four indoor exhibits — apart from jamming.



Of course the specter of the people is often raised in justifications for (and criticisms against) public art. Director of the Jogja Biennale X, Butet Kartaredjasa wrote that *Public on the Move* marked a post-reformasi empowerment of the *masyarakat* in their ability to visually express themselves in public space, which would lead their increased participation in the development of democratic life. Now the people are no more democratically empowered by a bunch of sculptures than artists are their cultural superiors responsible for bestowing upon them a moral and/or social-political agenda. (Yes, that’s right). But if we replaced *masyarakat* with *seniman*, and start regarding artists as members of the public, then we’re getting somewhere.

The most interesting thing about *Public on the Move* — for me as a Malaysian — was the symbiotic relationship between local government and Jogja Biennale in the use of public space. It was curators and artists that were democratically empowered in their ability to utilise the city as a means of expression. Yes, there were permit applications for every artwork – approximately 200 in fact – but the point was they were all accepted. This resulted in an inner city awash with art, a sculpture at every intersection, and a mural on the every wall. Even when the biennale is not up, public space in Jogja is treated as an open canvas. This is not only testament to a healthy and functional working relationship between artist groups and local government, but a mutual understanding that public space is meant for public use, rather than standing untouched as the private property of the state.



Reproduction of S. Sudjojono, *Kawan-Kawan Revolusi*, 1947

Some art activists in Jogja take this for granted by arguing that this is nothing more than the democratic rights that they have earned in the post-reformasi period. But this has to include a leadership that believes in the process. Even during the reformasi period the Sultan of Jogjakarta, Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, in his role as the Governor of Jogjakarta, came down squarely on the side of the public, often prompting local government to do the same. You'll never catch the Sri Sultan in a black tinted Mercedes with a CHIPs escort barking at people to move aside. He rocks up (sometimes on foot) to officiate everything from bicycle events to kampung theatre shows — many of which are held in the open fields surrounding his palace i.e. his backyard. As Butet Kartaredjasa reminded me, public space in Jogja technically belongs to the Sultan, which he has given to us to use.

Apart from his royal coolness, Mayor of Jogjakarta Herry Zudianto is also particularly open to public art initiatives. But this did not happen overnight. One of the key people responsible for developing local government's mindset on public art was none other than Samuel Indratma himself, in his role as co-founder of *Apotik Komik* and *Jogja Mural Forum* — artist groups instrumental in developing public space artworks in Jogja. In fact it would be safe to say that the ability for Jogja Biennale X to stage *Public on the Move* was a result of a jam session between Sam and the mayor that has spanned over the course of a decade.



Agung Kurniawan, *Semenit Senyap*, Performance, 2009

However only a few artists in *Public on the Move* chose to utilise this democratic space to focus on issues prevalent to the city itself. By this I mean public art that highlights the history or social aspects of the site that the works were placed, or site-specific work. Ade Darmawan, founding member of the Jakarta-based group *Ruang Rupa* calls this, "memperluaskan ruang publik", (the expansion of public space), in that it enhances knowledge about and around the site, rather than expanding the gallery space into the street. Of the few artists that attempted this, only one managed to bring forward an issue about the space where the work was staged. Trained in anthropology and working primarily in drawing, artist Agung Kurniawan staged a one minute 'die-in' called *Semenit Senyap* on the sidewalk of Jogja's main downtown intersection, (which he repeated several times to make his point). His aim was to draw attention to the number of road deaths, particularly to motorcyclists, that happen throughout Indonesia. Though the sidewalk was a compromise to disrupting public traffic in the middle of the intersection, the issue about the space, in particular safety in transport infrastructure, was made clear. "There are more road deaths in Indonesia per-year than there was in the war in Iraq", he said in an interview. As a result of this performance the issue of road safety was picked up by the local media.

Public on the Move made a deliberate point of not adhering to standardised biennale selection methods established by either the art market or contemporary art hierarchies. But in the process *Public on the Move* became not only an example of cooperation between local government and artists groups, but an example of democracy in practice — of not only artists' use of public space, but for better or worse, artists' use of the biennale as an event. Though many artists did not utilise this democratic privilege/right for political or knowledgeable ends, was it not enough that the public — or those that I observed taking photographs all over the work — had a lot of FUN in the process? Ade Darmawan answered this question with, "Only if that was the artist's intent."



Bayu Wardhana, Kepala Panas, Mixed Media, 2009

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Nadiah Bamadhaj is a Malaysian visual artist living in Jogjakarta with her husband, Indonesian artist Arie Dyanto.