

Never a dull moment in Jogja

Mella Jaarsma

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The artist communities in Indonesia have always been known for their ability to self-organise and initiate responses to wider social events. Artist Mella Jaarsma shares how the artists in Yogyakarta, one of the most vibrant hubs of arts and culture in the country, took the pandemic in their stride and responded creatively to continue engaging audiences, generate means of living and support the vulnerable among them.

When the pandemic hit, all art spaces and communities in Yogyakarta had to cancel their regular programmes from the beginning of March 2020, but it took only a few weeks before the arts community started to think about alternatives.

The arts community in Yogyakarta is used to having to respond to political and social upheaval, as well as natural disasters. The self-reliant community turns adversity into an approach of helping one another to get through turbulent times. For example, Yustina Neni, director of Kedai Kebun Forum¹, cooked every day over two months hundreds of meals to deliver to “Dapur Aksi Berbagi” (Share Action Kitchen), a free food delivery for people who had lost their income, like the transgender community, students from East Indonesia who could not go home, and others in need.

In 1997 during the *Krismon* economic crisis (Asian financial crisis), and up to May 1998 when President Suharto finally resigned after months of demonstrations, I remember at Cemeti that we had to survive with nine months of no income. When the big earthquake hit in 2006 in Yogyakarta, artists had to spend at least one year to help rebuild and re-vitalise communities with social art projects for the many inhabitants who lost their homes before the artists returned to their previous practices².

This time, the arts community is one of the most affected by the virus outbreak, with performers hit the hardest. But ‘gotong royong’ or community collaboration set in motion. The musician Leilani Hermiasih, also known as Frau, released a new album and tickets for online listening were sold. Together with other musicians, after consulting with doctors, she also created a music list based on acoustemology, to be played in hospitals for patients and medical staff (www.meruang.com) with the hope of lifting their spirits.

Ruang Mes 56, a community of photographers and video artists, turned their art space into a kitchen. They started to cook for the artist community and volunteers who came to sew masks. They collected textile donations and produced thousands of masks in the first weeks of the pandemic to hand out to people in the local markets, *becak* drivers³, and those in other small businesses. The production of these masks needed support and was advertised on Instagram, so one could, for example, donate money for 100 masks.

With no end of the pandemic on the horizon, the Ruang Mes 56 artists started to create different programmes with the hope of generating some income for their own community. They made a special series of works to be sold in an online store called Unstocking Room. All members also gave virtual individual workshops, which generated some income.

One of the members and founders of Ruang Mes 56, Wimo Ambala Bayang, decided to wander through the empty streets at night to take photographs of the city and his surroundings (Figure 1). Personally, I like to do this during uncertain times as well. For example, I did this when Jogja (local shortened name for Yogyakarta) got hit by the big earthquake in 2006, and whenever Jogja was covered in ashes after

a volcanic eruption. Especially in these times when we are flooded with photography, I like working with a specific photographic aesthetic, using a more dramatic black and white approach. The black and white photographs look like fiction.

To capture the signs of life in the pandemic, Wimo told me that he had to focus on personal night series, otherwise he would have been lost and depressed. Besides being involved in the activities at Ruang Mes 56, he needed to make personal notes through these still images. He said, “To be a photographer and using a camera. we can work in the moment, respond directly and be reflective at the same time. You witness

the moment and this extraordinary situation, and its conditions are experienced by everyone in the world. So it becomes very important documented footage”.

Wimo was already using several platforms to promote his work before the pandemic. But this time, he started to explore more intensively his visibility as an artist in social media and the various platforms that emerged during the pandemic. He learned to work more specifically with hashtags. A photo he posted on Instagram with #ICPConcerned was nominated out of thousands by International Center of Photography to be printed, exhibited and archived.



Figure 1. 30 April 2020-Night Letters—a series of photographs taken by artist Wimo Ambala Bayang at night as he wandered through the empty streets of Jogja. Images courtesy of Wimo Ambala Bayang.



Figure 2. *Tupu*, Mezzotint, 8 x 10cm, 2020—a mezzotint print of a Papermoon puppet character using a small etching press. Artwork and image courtesy of visual artist Iwan Effendi.

Iwan Effendi, a visual artist and one of the founders of Papermoon Puppet Theatre, saw many of his friends getting passive and depressed. As such, he began looking for some activity to do other than staring at a screen. Using a small etching press that he never had time to use, he started producing tiny aqua and mezzotint prints of characters from the Papermoon puppet plays (Figure 2). Each etching was produced in sets of 10 prints, and he invited artists Uji ‘Hahan’ Handoko, Ruth Marbun, Maryanto Beb and Hendra ‘Hehe’ Harsono to co-produce with him.

Concentrating for weeks on honing his etching skills, Iwan mastered the diverse etching techniques during these months of isolation. By selling them online, the artists received a basic income. In July 2020, Iwan Effendi and Maria Tri

Sulistiyani, the original founder of Papermoon Puppet Theatre, started working on a new Papermoon production. The international puppet festival they organised later in 2020 has to change shape due to the pandemic. At the point of writing, they are working on an alternative online festival. The lockdown fortunately allowed them to focus on the publication of their first book, called *Selepas Napas*, which provides profound insights into their performances and beautiful projects.

The online space has changed for the art community during this time. No art hub wanted to lag behind when it came to conceptualising and organising a new masterclass, workshop or Zoom discussion. The virtual space became very intense and we were forced to reread ‘public space’ in the

context of lockdown. I think that most online programmes during these months had the purpose to reach the public, to entertain instead of creating a quality work. Previously, social media was most commonly used as a platform for promoting the art projects and artworks. Now social media has become the art platform itself. The artworks created only exist on the web. Papermoon Puppet Theatre initiated in March and April two series of virtual performances called Story Tailor #1 and #2. They advertised

the performances through Instagram where the Papermoon account had 42,000 followers (Figure 3). The noteworthy feature is that every performance was created and tailored for individuals who had donated to the programme and who were then given the privilege to set the theme for the customised performance. The themes were wide-ranging, for example, blue sky, rice field, tension, uncertainty, blindness, recovery, birthday etc.



Figure 3. Two series of virtual performances called Story Tailor #1 and #2 were advertised through Papermoon Puppet Theatre’s Instagram account which helped ensure a sold-out event. Image courtesy of Papermoon Puppet Theatre.



Figure 4. Staff working in the exhibition space while observing safe distancing.
Image courtesy of Cemeti Institute for Art & Society.

Our sense of time has been questioned during the pandemic. We need to create experiences or moments in our lives, in order to remember and look back and have the feeling that we have progressed in enriching our lives. The pandemic is taking its toll on the human need to undergo specific experiences after almost five months at home, with movement in a limited space. In my opinion, connecting every day to virtual reality and undergoing daily routine, these moments became blurred into one undifferentiated period, changing our sense of time. I believe that we survive through specific experiences in which all our senses are activated.

The exhibition space at Cemeti Institute for Art & Society is now empty, except for staff spread around working on their laptops (Figure 4). They are no longer working in the original small office space, sitting side by side. Instead, they have decided not to work from home, but meet each

other in Cemeti while observing social distancing. Rimpang Nusantara (Rhizomatic Archipelago), a project that already started one and half years ago, is an exchange project with 13 artists from 11 regions—Yogyakarta, Madura, Aceh, Pontianak, Palu, Polewali Mandar (Sulawesi Barat), Samarinda, Tanjung Pinang, Ambon, Kupang, and Atambua. These artists have met in person in short residencies, which were held in various river, sea and land residencies throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The last months were used to strengthen the relationships with discussions online, and to share work and creative processes with the focus on various forms of contextual art practices and knowledge production.

In July 2020, Cemeti has also started the Impossible Projector Proyek Mustahil. Twenty paper notebooks were distributed to artists, curators and arts communities. One thing that is certain and which we want to continue to believe

in, is, in times of COVID-19, digital and virtual spaces are not the only platforms for art, because the opportunities for art experimentations are wide. The goal of the Impossible Project is to place “(the) impossible” and “Impossibility” as the subject matter, with the focus on the necessity of the arts in accordance with the actual context in contemporary society. Twenty books will be filled with writings and drawings about “Impossible Ideas”, and like a relay, the book will circulate from one artist/art worker to another. In the end, Cemeti hopes to receive these books back and exhibit them, sharing them with a larger public and initiating discussions.

As mentioned earlier, I believe that we survive through specific experiences in which all our senses are activated. The participatory art projects with physical involvement, is an encounter with space and time, and provide such specific experiences. I am curious what the future will bring. We are suddenly in a fast-shifting culture, but in which direction are we shifting, and what impact has this on our cultural values? What is the role of visual art, its artists and the art world now and in the future? We have to reinvent and have strategies to position ourselves during this moment in history and after. □

About the Author



Co-founder of Cemeti Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, the first space for contemporary art in Indonesia when it was established in 1988, Mella Jaarsma was born in the Netherlands and studied visual art at Minerva Art Academy in Groningen. Jaarsma is known for her complex costume installations and her focus on forms of cultural and racial diversity embedded within clothing, the body and food. Her works have been presented widely in exhibitions and art events in Indonesia and internationally.

Notes:

1. Kedai Kebun Forum is an alternative art space managed by artists and consists of a gallery, performance space, bookstore and restaurant.
2. More than 300,000 homes were destroyed and 6,000 people killed.
3. The cycle rickshaw, a popular form of transport in Indonesia, is also known as *becak* locally.