

## ***Sama-Sama/Together* & Intersection for the Arts** By Kevin Chen

Intersection for the Arts is San Francisco's oldest alternative non-profit arts organization. Founded in the early 1960's and incorporated in 1965, Intersection began as a merger of several faith-based experiments that were using art to reach disenfranchised neighborhood youth while also providing artists who were conscientious objectors with an alternative to serving in the Vietnam War. We have consistently been rooted in a commitment to utilize art to provide alternative solutions to immediate community and larger world concerns. Over the years, we have stayed true to our original mission while also evolving to respond to the changing needs around us. Widely considered to be one of the most vital and important cultural centers in the Bay Area, Intersection is well-known for its commitment to emphasizing the process of art-making and creating space and time for artists and audience members to come together to imagine and create new cultural experiments that aim to transform our world.



Kevin Chen with Apotik Komik outside of Intersection for the Arts, and flyer for the project

Over the past four decades, we have provided the Bay Area with an almost incomprehensible array of groundbreaking multi-disciplinary cultural programming and have worked with a remarkable range of artists including Whoopi Goldberg, Jessica Hagedorn, Michael Ondaatje, David Henry Hwang, and Ishmael Reed. Recently, we have worked with Alice Walker, John Trudell, Denis Johnson, bell hooks, Dave Eggers, Naomi Iizuka, Lebbeus Woods, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Claudia Bernardi, Joe Goode, and Gary Snyder as well as thousands of emerging artists.

We were first approached by local artist and activist Megan Wilson in November 2001 about an international exchange project she had been thinking of since her travels to Indonesia just a year earlier. We had worked with Megan and a number of the artists associated with the Clarion Alley Mural Project in the past, and were excited and honored to have this chance to help make an ambitious international exchange project come to fruition. We also were looking forward to teaming up with a community-based organization whose mission and intent resonates greatly with our own mission and intent to use art as a means to create and build community, and also as a means to explore larger social and political issues in the world. Yet, never did we think that it would actually happen with so many different setbacks that came up changes in scheduling, unsuccessful fund-raising attempts, post-9/11 difficulties in securing visas for the Indonesian artists.



**Sama-Sama/Together artists' talk at Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco**

For a while, many of us really felt that there were too many indirect factors in control of the project's ability to get off the ground, especially with the changing state of the world in regards to countries suspected of ties with terrorism (Indonesia being the country with the largest Muslim population). Even with as much hope and belief in the project that existed amongst all of us, we also were beginning to plan for alternative solutions to an international exchange project that possibly would've been derailed by larger forces concerned with the international "war on terror." We informed many people in the Bay Area arts community and beyond about our situation, and were able to find an ally in Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. With her help, and with the help of the many

organizations in San Francisco that were slated to participate in the project (including the Asian Art Museum, Southern Exposure, 509 Cultural Center and the Luggage Store Gallery), we were able to state our case to the United States Embassy in Indonesia about how a project like this would only serve to counter terrorist acts that if more opportunities were created for true international cultural exchange, the world would be comprised of more people with a better capacity to understand, tolerate, and embrace cultural, religious, and political difference.

One of the most rewarding aspects about this project has been to directly witness the similarities of not only artwork, but also of methodology amongst the artists from San Francisco and Yogyakarta. The American and Indonesian artists participating in /Sama-sama/You're Welcome both produce work influenced by comics and imagery found in the public sphere such as graffiti, advertising, and design with an indefatigable, resourceful, and community oriented approach. Using materials such as wooden pallets, cardboard, and house paint often reclaimed for artistic purposes, all of the artists manifest the inherent potential of these commonplace objects with a distinct handmade approach. Both groups of artists also inhabit the periphery of our modern capitalist world, using a sensibility informed both by social activism and environmentalism and a number of different cultural tools to open, educate, and transform the communities they live in. Sama-sama/You're Welcome /has provided the opportunity to learn how each culture has influenced and responded to the artwork being created an exchange that will continue to generate fertile, cross-cultural dialogue amongst the communities of the Pacific Rim.

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