

Two Communities and Beyond

By Megan Wilson

In the summer of 2001 I traveled to Indonesia to learn about the country's contemporary arts. I was curious to find alternative communities and learn how national and international politics and global consumer culture had affected the region.

Indonesia was particularly appealing for this reason. I couldn't recall having ever heard anything about the country's contemporary art scene. I also knew that the political climate had been incredibly tense over the past several years with the forced resignation of Mohamed Soeharto in 1998. In addition, Bali is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, making it fertile ground for the effects of global consumerism, as well as providing cheap labor sweatshops for companies such as The Gap, Levis, and Nike.



Bali, Legong dance performance

Prior to my trip, I was able to find a great deal of information about Indonesia's traditional arts (shadow puppets, Ramayana ballet, and gamelan), yet discovered very little about the work being created now. Through my observations while traveling, I began to understand more clearly some of the reasons behind the lack of visibility for contemporary Indonesian art in the U.S. Tourism accounts for 1/3 of Indonesia's economy. The effect is striking - shop after shop filled with traditional objects handcrafted now as souvenirs and temples littered with candy wrappers and cigarettes. The foreign impact has also been felt on the nation's cultural image. Tourist demands and currency for traditional arts such as the gamelan, batik, and Legong dance have helped to create an artistically stagnant identity for Indonesia.

While primarily unknown to the art world in the United States, I did find a thriving contemporary, alternative arts community in Yogyakarta on the island of Java. I visited the Cemeti Foundation and Gallery and was struck by how similar the art in Yogya was to work being created in San Francisco, yet with a clear identity of its own.



Interviewing Arie Dyanto, Bambang Toko, and Popok Tri Wahyudi at ISI for Stretcher.org

I was also introduced to and interviewed Apotik Komik, an artists' collective that had begun creating public artworks in 1992, working much like artists who have worked with the Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP). Talking with them, I was intrigued by the parallels between their approach to their work and the ways many of the artists I know in San Francisco respond to their environment. They have a strong social consciousness interlaced with humor and work with a bold aesthetic and strong commitment to craft, yet often present their projects in settings that guarantee an ephemeral experience. Additionally, they mostly use plywood or cardboard and house paints because traditional arts materials (canvas and oil or acrylic paints) are very expensive in Indonesia. Following my return I published several articles about the work I'd seen in Yogya, including an exhibition by Dame Tiarma Ruth Sirat and the interview with Apotik Komik on www.stretcher.org.

Through these initial introductions and the relationships that continued to develop following my return, I knew that I had found a community of artists who could provide great inspiration to the arts (and greater) community in the Bay Area, and in particular artists who have worked with CAMP - and vice versa.

I returned in August of 2001. One month later, life changed dramatically for everyone throughout the world. The 9/11 tragedy and the repercussions that have followed, including the bombings on Bali and in Jakarta, made it even more critical for understanding and dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Sama-sama/Together, in part grew out of the recognition for this need and the possibility to provide a creative response to the divides that have deepened as a result of recent world events. The project was designed to foster understanding of contemporary art and culture between the two communities through the creation of art, as well as through cross-cultural dialogue between participating artists, organizations and the public at large.

In selecting the artists from San Francisco, I was primarily interested in curating a group who worked with similar aesthetics and methodologies as Apotik Komik – producing work from a “do it yourself” approach, influenced by comics and imagery in the public sphere such as advertising, design, and graffiti, and who strongly hold community as a virtue. However, I was also interested in representing a broad range of visual styles within this slant. I believe the artists chosen (Aaron Noble, Alicia McCarthy, Carolyn Ryder Cooley, Andrew Schoultz, Carolyn Castaño, and myself) reflected this vision. The selection of the participating artists from Yogyakarta was left up to the founders of Apotik Komik.



Sama-Sama/Together artists, Yogyakarta Indonesia 2003

After tossing a number of possibilities around for a project title (Public Trade Union, Public Trust Exchange, Gang–alley, Umum-public, gratis-free of charge) and sharing them with Arie Dyanto (the member of Apotik I corresponded with during the initial development of the project), we decided on Sama-sama/You’re Welcome. However, following the absurd and dehumanizing visa process that

Apotik was subjected to, the title Sama-sama/Together (this is also a translation for sama-sama) became the preferred project name.

I invited Intersection for the Arts to be a partner on the project based on Intersection's long history of presenting programming that approaches art and culture as a complex, multi-layered relationship that is constantly changing and evolving -- and for providing a platform for exploring this relationship through many different forms of dialogue and critique. Thankfully they said "Yes" because Sama-sama/Together could not have become a reality without them. Intersection has been an indispensable hub for the project, and Kevin Chen in particular has been both an indefatigable partner in organizing and a visionary in shaping the project. Equally, Sama-sama/Together could not have happened without the hard work of Apotik Komik in Yogyakarta, and especially Ade Tanesia, who has been the organizing and administrative backbone in Indonesia and also our partner in bringing the project to fruition.

Following two years of preparation, the San Francisco artists arrived in Yogyakarta in July 2003. Over five and a half weeks, the SF artists painted large-scale murals throughout the city, met several dozen members of the arts and greater community in Yogyakarta, had lunch with the Yogyakarta mayor and his staff, and cultivated relationships with the artists from Apotik Komik that have become the heart of the project. In addition to the murals, Apotik Komik arranged for a video screening and exhibition at LIP (the French Cultural Center in Yogya) and an exhibition at the Via Via Café.



Motorbike tour of mural sites in Yogyakarta

The process for the design and creation of the murals was left up to each of the artists. However, Apotik Komik paired all of the San Francisco artists with an Indonesian artist to work with as an assistant or as a collaborator for the duration of the project. Apotik

also arranged for the permission of the sites prior to the SF artists' arrival. The sites were then visited by all of the artists and selected based on individual interests.

Andrew Schoultz collaborated with Nano Warsono and painted a 100 ft. long wall in a residential neighborhood located on the North West edge of Yogya. Carolyn Ryder Cooley worked with Arya Panjalu and painted an electrical box located in the center island of an intersection near the Kridosono Stadium. Aaron Noble worked with Arie Dyanto and painted on the façade of the Permata Theater at the intersection of Jl. Sultan Agung and Jl. Gajah Mada. Alicia McCarthy collaborated with Codit and Farhansiki on a large wall next to the train tracks near Jl. Malioboro. Carolyn Castaño and I both painted on different sections of the wall on the outside of the cultural Purawisata complex on Jl. Ireda. I worked with Farhansiki. Carolyn worked with Rohman.



John McGlynn speaking at opening exhibition for Sama-Sama/Together at Via Via Café, Yogyakarta

While initially we focused a great deal on highlighting the Muslim/non-Muslim aspects of the exchange, in practice our cultural observations – similarities and differences – were more informed by economics, class, and race rather than any religious affiliations. Arriving in Indonesia as a wave of American Imperialism crashed over the Muslim world, the US artists came as culturally embarrassed people, and were at pains to project a respectful demeanor toward the unfamiliar culture of Java. The Indonesian artists, on the other hand, arrived in America as wisened-up bad boys nursing a colonial grudge and felt entirely free to mock (and

emulate) the materialist individualism of the west, an attitude the American artists encouraged. Even so, the processes of public art are so complexly charged between the demands the work makes on the artist and the dreams the public has for the work that moments of abrasion did occur in Yogja, and moments of conciliation in San Francisco. Each of the artists, within the parameters of his or her practice, responded to their mural site with consideration of the public nature of the work, and within the role of an outsider.



Lunch with Yogyakarta Mayor Herry Zudianto and Staff

Aaron Noble's work is disorienting even to western audiences. His original design for the Bioskop Permata (a theater that features slasher/porn movies with titles such as "Butcher Woman" and "Raped by an Angel") was palpably sinister and included a giant clawed hand and a long descending blade. Despite showing the design around to the neighbors of the mural and receiving no objections (but a number of puzzled looks), some members of Apotik remained concerned that the blade, in particular, would evoke locally specific painful response related to gangs of political thugs who sometimes ride through the streets on motorcycles swinging scimitars during election season. Noble resolved the blade form into a kind of tusk with a cascade of ribbons, arguably weakening the composition of the mural, and made various other modifications. Carolyn Ryder Cooley was deeply affected by the common practice of owning caged birds and created an homage to these helpless prisoners by painting images of them as free to come and go as they would please. Andrew Schoultz was met with some hostility as a westerner annexing a huge space in a working class Muslim neighborhood in which he had no history. However, after numerous meetings with the community and village head, they came to respect and appreciate Andrew's vision and

commitment to values that were close to their own. My own initial concept was to barely paint on the wall at all and to mostly cover the street and sidewalks with bright flowers that over time would become faded and covered with dirt – a reference to the beautiful natural environment of Indonesia, which is rapidly changing and disappearing due to the influences of the West and economic necessity. However, following the constant request by the neighbors to “please paint on the wall,” I compromised and painted much more than I’d intended. I also challenged the tolerance of the neighborhood in blocking off half of the roadbed for several weeks, an inconvenience they tolerated with graciousness hard to imagine in the west. Carolyn Castaño commented on the ideal Indonesian image of straight haired, light-skinned feminine beauty by painting “girls girls” with big swirly coifs. Alicia McCarthy, in collaboration with Farhansiki and Codit drew attention to the question of place and “home” by painting large interlocking rainbows with movable mountains and the three dimensional metal text “Nobody’s Home?” at the site of the railroad tracks where many “homeless” youth live.



Apotik Komik visiting Clarion Alley after their arrival in San Francisco

When the San Francisco artists left Yogya at the beginning of August it was still unclear if the Apotik Komik artists would be granted visas. Following three interviews over the course of several months, they had been told to check the embassy’s Website daily to see if their passport numbers were posted. Simultaneously we were getting conflicting reports from our embassy contacts in Jakarta. This was a stressful time for everyone involved in the project – not knowing if we would be able to fully share the experience that we had worked for

together. However, after several more weeks of negotiating through new, stricter immigration laws and working with several key individuals in Nancy Pelosi's office (thank you Harriet Ishimoto!) and the US embassy in Jakarta (thank you Riley Sever!) the Apotik Komik artists (Samuel Indratama, Arie Dyanto, Nano Warsono, and Arya Panjalu) were granted their visas and arrived, exhausted but ecstatic, at SFO International Airport on September 2, 2003.

Following the arrival of Apotik Komik in San Francisco, all of the project artists collaborated on an exhibition at Intersection for the Arts that opened on September 10th and was up through October 25th. Intersection also hosted events at the gallery every Saturday afternoon throughout the exhibition; these included an artists' talk by Apotik Komik, a talk by Professor Jeff Hadler from UC Berkeley on contemporary Indonesian art from a historical context, a video screening, and an artists' talk by the San Francisco artists.

Similar to Apotik Komik's preparation in Yogya, CAMP and the San Francisco artists worked to deepen community relationships with selected sites and secure wall space for Apotik to create murals in San Francisco. These spaces included Southern Exposure Gallery at 17th and Alabama Streets, Le Beau Nob Hill Market at Clay and Leavenworth Streets and Rainbow Grocery at Folsom and Division. Like the San Francisco artists, the design of the murals was left to Apotik Komik. However, unlike the San Francisco artists, the Apotik Komik artists chose to collaborate with each other on all of the murals produced.



Mural by Nano Warsono and Arya Panjalu on Le Beau Nob Hill Market, San Francisco

I was impressed with how acute and accurate Apotik Komik's impressions of San Francisco were and their keen ability to visually articulate these images. The locations of the works strongly informed each of the murals. Nano Warsono and

Arya Panjalu used a combination of wood cutouts with painting directly on the wall of the LeBeau Market in the neighborhood of Nob Hill, an affluent area with very little public art, and absolutely none with political content. Both Nano and Arya picked up on this climate and provided the community with a glimpse into the way most of the world perceives such decadence at the expense of so many others' hard and painful labor. We are lucky that Joe and Omar Omran, who have owned the market and deli for over fifteen years and are greatly respected in the neighborhood, have also consistently supported and defended the free expression of the artists they have hosted to create work, even at the risk of offending some of their customers. Despite the apocalyptic seriousness of the mural imagery, Nano blithely threw in a couple of dolphins at the request of Joe, who belongs to a swimming club.



Mural by Samuel Indratma and Arie Dyanto on Project Artaud fence, San Francisco

Samuel Indratama and Arie Dyanto painted on the wall in front of Southern Exposure Gallery in the Mission District. The area is home to two rival gangs – the Norteños (affiliated with the color red) and the Surreños (affiliated with the color blue), whose roots lie within the pride and location of their Latin American heritage. Unaware of this symbolism, Arie painted a series of figures in red hooded sweatshirts and bright blue jeans in a series of ritualistic poses. As a backdrop Sam and Arie created a psychedelic parody, crowded with black and white detail like an underground comic, of the American dollar, highlighting the Masonic/ Emersonian/ Juxtapoz-ian eyeball. In a city that has seen many parodies of the dollar and the flag, this one manages to be unexpected.

All of the Yogyakarta artists and most of the San Francisco artists contributed to the wall on the Rainbow Market, a worker owned and operated health food store

in the Mission District. Apotik painted on cutout and shaped wood panels, while the SF artists painted directly on the wall. Rainbow is greatly respected for its commitment to fair labor practices and buying from local organic farmers. However, to an outsider from a country in which food is sold outside literally off the ground from local farmers (or grown at home) and consumers don't have organic, vegan, macrobiotic lifestyle options, Rainbow can appear to be no different from a Safeway or Albertsons. I can still remember my first trip over to LeBeau Market with Nano and all he could do was shake his head in disbelief and confusion and say "so different, so different." Nano's contribution to the Rainbow mural was somewhat shocking. He painted several sets of Siamese twins in food packaging moving on a conveyor belt— one twin growing out of an egg container chomps on a big leg of poultry, another holding a bag of potato chips that reads "Lies Potato Chips" (initially there was talk of it reading "Organic Lies"). Arya also worked with a double-sided theme of good vegetables and bad vegetables. Arie, focusing again on local lifestyle and fashion, created an elegiac tableau of tie-dyed yoga practitioners, and Samuel created a series of masks, deepening the mystery of this mural.



Sama-Sama/Together opening at Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco

Happily, all of the murals in both communities have provoked wide ranging and engaged response, from anger to admiration and deep gratitude. Most importantly the work has provided a vehicle for dialogue and discussions about public space, community and the perceptions and misconceptions of different

cultures. In addition, the murals live on and provide inspiration to the communities they're housed in and passersby. When I returned to the neighborhood of Jalan Ireda I found that more flowers had bloomed—neighborhood residents have continued to paint them and also butterflies in the style of Carolyn Castaño. Yogyakarta now has hundreds of murals (they had almost none when I first visited in 2001) and stenciling has become a common and sophisticated form of street art. The Sama-sama/Together project won both a Bay Guardian Best of the Bay for Public Art Award and a Best International Mural Project Award from Precita Eyes Mural Project. And since I live across the street from the LeBeau mural, I frequently witness admirers of the mural stopping to take photographs and videotape the work.



Speaking at Geneng Street Art Project public discussion about *Sama-Sama/Together* in Yogyakarta September 2015

The relationships that developed through the project have also continued to deepen. All of the San Francisco artists are still in touch with the Indonesian artists on a regular basis through email. All of the San Francisco artists have plans to return to Yogyakarta. In addition, through the project and the relationship that was developed with one of our funders, the Asian Cultural Council several of the SF artists and community partners have hosted three visiting curators in San

Francisco and introduced them to Clarion Alley Mural Project and the Sama-sama/You're Welcome Project, including Manray Hsu from Taipei Taiwan, Uthit Atimana from Chiang Mai Thailand, and Rifky Effendy from Jakarta Indonesia. A number of curators and writers have also visited Yogyakarta and have been hosted by Samuel Indratma and Ade Tanesia to introduce them to Sama-sama/Together and the arts community in Yogya, these include: Alex Sainsbury, a trustee of the Peer art project in London, England, Duc Nguyen, a producer of KQED's Pacific Time, Michael Moore, independent writer, and Jamie James of TIME Asia.

Sama-sama/Together is, as far as I can determine, the first public project exchange residency ever produced in San Francisco. That is, not only did US muralists go somewhere and paint, but also artists from that country came back to the US to paint. In that sense we disowned the neo-colonialist model of unilateral cultural influence. The financial and political obstacles to this were almost overwhelming and it is not surprising that it never happens. My initial timeline of eight months for fundraising and organization stretched to two years, with production of this catalog following a year after that. It is remarkable that Sama-sama/Together was a grass roots project from beginning to end, organized by a handful of individuals who volunteered thousands of hours, and with the added generosity of many, many community members who committed their time and energy to bringing the project to fruition. On the other hand its possible that such a project could only be done by a small group of committed friends. Big institutions with paid staffs and enviable office facilities and telephone budgets also have institutional strictures, competing curatorial agendas, levels of prestige to be maintained, ponderous decision-making processes, star power and quota considerations in the selection of artists and bottom line revenue projections to be taken into account. Could a project based on the affinities of artists, characterized by a rejection of western fine art hierarchies, with no enhancement of the market value of stored artworks, ever make its way through that gamut?

Sama-sama/Together continues to generate fertile, cross-cultural exchange amongst the two communities and beyond, through the intimate human channels that constitute the best defense of culture against power.

**Megan Wilson, Curator, *Sama-Sama/Together*
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