

Apotik Komik

By Ade Tanesia

The *Sama-Sama/Together* project was held when nations in the world, including Indonesia, were overwhelmed with intense sentiment towards America. After the 11 September 2002 incident, followed by the US attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, the previously sympathetic opinion of the world towards the great calamity that struck the US changed to be aversion to foreign policies implemented by President George Bush. It was in the midst of this anti-American sentiment the *Sama-Sama/Together* project was run. We never thought before that the sentiment also prevailed over a number of art communities in Yogyakarta. In fact, the art world often seen as liberating arena is sometimes unable to liberate itself from stereotypes. Some art communities are not perceptive enough to be able to distinguish the US government's policies from the people of American nationalities. An art space in Yogyakarta has spontaneously refused my proposal for this collaborative exhibition organized by Indonesian and American artists. However, because of this cynicism and refusal, we were resolved to prove that art in public space can be an effective space to build understanding, acceptance, and respect for two different cultures. We also wanted to learn and demonstrate that such stereotypic judgment about a nation is simply a naivety. Only with this spirit we could carry on with the implementation of the *Sama-Sama/Together* project.



Meeting with Mie Cornoedus after CAMP's arrival

Our first meeting was held at Via Via Café. The artists were Aaron Noble, Andrew Schultz, Megan Wilson, Carolyn Castano and Carolyn Ryder, Alicia McCarthy (arrived two weeks later). All were associated in San Francisco art community named "Clarion Alley Mural Project" (CAMP). Though in previous

year (2002) we had met with Megan Wilson and Carolyn Castano, the meeting was still unrelaxed. Mie Cornoedus gave brief but practical advices about local culture and how they should work in public places. Female artists should not wear shorts and sleeveless and thin shirt. When talking with other person, they should not put their arms akimbo or call someone aloud from a distance. For the Javanese, such attitudes are impolite and disrespectful. The tips may sound strange for the American artists or they may disagree with the advices. But when I gave Carolyn Castano a ride on motorbike, she said "... there is actually no woman wearing shorts or rather open shirt in the streets."



Community Arts Discussion with Megan Wilson and Carolyn Castaño at Geleran Gallery 2002

In the first day, Apotik Komik took the CAMP artists to all locations where the authorities had given us permission to make murals. One by one, the artists discussed with us concerning the place they prefer. Then, we introduced to them Indonesian artists who would accompany them during the project. From the beginning we had selected some artists to be the partners for the CAMP artists. The partners whose professions were also artists would serve as mediator between local people and the American artists and should open the possibilities of dialogue between the artists of different nationalities. We thought that such mediator was necessary since there was a problem of communication as well as strong anti-American sentiment among the people so that Apotik Komik would not let the foreign artists working alone in public spaces. In order to provide security to the visiting artists in Yogyakarta, we needed to arrange a meeting between the San Francisco's artists with the Mayor of Yogyakarta. A formal

reception was then published in mass media. We hoped that this can be an initial socialization and information to the public of Yogyakarta that there are a number of foreign artists working in public places in Yogyakarta.

Initially we expected that the San Francisco artists will make murals based on historical narrative relevant with the environment around the places they are working in. This means, we hoped that they would carry out some simple research about the habitat of their locations. However, this could not be implemented because the time was insufficient while they also had to adapt to the environment of their respective location. We, on the other hand, should not intervene in their working strategy and creative process. As a matter of fact, the sharpest criticism from the art public of Yogyakarta said that the works of the American artists are incoherent with the environment. The artists failed to see the differences of making murals in Yogyakarta and San Francisco. They were seen as merely changing the place but unwilling to understand the local culture. This criticism was reasonable though not completely true as in fact the American artists, with all limitations, always tried to understand the local conditions. With their respective style of mural, the contents and messages presented by their artworks were the results of their interaction with local surroundings. Carolyn Castano, since her visit in 2002, has collected old photographs she bought in Prawirotaman area. Based on the pictures, she depicted the faces of Javanese girls mixed with the character of her own face. Alicia McCarthy observed the life of the homeless children living alongside of the Lempuyangan railway line and then she made a mural added with text "Nobody's Home". Aaron Noble inserted in her work elements of a shop's logo located in front of his mural near the Permata theater. His friendly relationship with the parking-men who accompanied him every day was represented symbolically in his mural. The work of Megan Wilson was also inspired by batik motifs that she arranged into colorful flowers. She also had friendly relationship with people around her mural and even some of them asked her to paint their houses with the typical flowers of Megan Wilson. The flowers were the sign of her encounters with local inhabitants. Carolyn Ryder responded to a large metal box which formerly was an electric generator box used in the Dutch colonial era. She interpreted the box as a cage in which freedom is tied down. As I see it, Carolyn Ryder was attentive to animal condition. She once took a walk at the south town square of Yogyakarta and saw the legs of elephants were chained. She was so touched seeing many kinds of animals in Ngasem traditional market were caged, tied down, and ready for sale. Perhaps, for Carolyn, this has violated animal's right of life. Andrew Schultz created an excellent drawing on the wall alongside of Tugu railway line in Samsat area and he also had close association with local people. His work responded the small shops and food stalls owned by the people. The most important aspect was the

interaction and close relationship between local people and San Francisco artists. Carolyn Ryder was friendly with the owner of a stall selling cigarettes and soft drinks who always accompanied her during her process of finishing mural. Megan had warm relationship with a family living in front of her mural. The mother of the family even asked her to stay overnight in her house. Alicia stayed in Indonesia only shortly (two weeks) so that she did not have enough time to develop relationship with people who every day presented around the location of her mural. However, she has developed an intensively collaborative relationship with Farhan and Codit. Alicia's mural is the only work that shows direct collaboration between Indonesian and American artists, namely collaboration in the context of idea, material, and implementation. Aaron Noble had friendly relationship with the parking-men usually worked in front of Permata theater. Inhabitants around the location of Andrew Schoultz's mural served him with drink every day. They thought how a foreigner could come here far away from his country only to decorate their place. Until presently, they always keep Andrew's mural from unwanted scribble. Carolyn Castano also had close relationship with people hanging around the sidewalk every afternoon and took a look at her mural. At first, Carolyn Castano felt uneasy to find herself to be like an object of sight but, day by day, she did not feel ashamed anymore and even she liked the children from nearby kampong who came up to her every day.



At the beginning, the ideal collaboration between the artists of Apotik Komik and those from San Francisco was rather hard to realize. For example, the Indonesian artists involved in this project, especially those from Java, were sometimes unable to express directly their objection to something. In contrast, the Westerners, especially the American artists from San Francisco, were unable to understand the thought and feeling of others expressed allusively. They prefer

straightforward expression to understand what others mean. The role of Mie Cornoedus as an expatriate who has been living for a long time in Indonesia was crucial in order to mediate the communication and avoid misunderstanding between the East and the West. In addition, our meetings were intensive enough since besides making murals we had other programs that should be discussed together, such as exhibition at Via Via Café, artist's talk at the Cemeti Art House, and photo and other artworks exhibition at the France Cultural Center. Through cooperation, we were able to bridge the communication gap resulting from cultural differences.



When San Francisco artists went home, Indonesian artists had not yet been certain about their visa for visiting America. That time, we did not want to hope too much as the more important task for us was that the visit of San Francisco artists to Yogyakarta had been accomplished successfully. Eventually, however, the artists of Apotik Komik (Samuel Indratma, Arie Dyanto, Nano Warsono, and Arya Pandjalu) could get the visa and they went to San Francisco at the end of August. Their travel to San Francisco was certainly a valuable experience for them. Maybe because they had been familiar with San Francisco artists, they did not find significant problems in accomplishing their project in San Francisco. Some Indonesian artists told they were lucky as they could feel the heartbeat of the art world in San Francisco that takes full advantage of the streets as a medium of art expressions. Some even said that San Francisco is a warm city where people could still meet and spend their time chatting in the streets. "Like in Yogyakarta," an artist said. During their visit, the Indonesian artists stayed in the houses of San Francisco artists so that they could develop cross-cultural relationship which is not merely slogan often boasted by art communities but the real one at the level of daily life. San Francisco is also known as a melting pot

that artists from Apotik Komik could get in touch with other art communities from Mexico, Vietnam, and other places, and this is surely an experience enriching their knowledge. The artists made contact not only with visual art communities but also got acquainted with communities of music, dance, and alternative art spaces in San Francisco.

In the streets, they meet many kinds of people, such as gangs and the homeless something they never imagined that there are homeless people in superpower country like the US. Along with this project, the Apotik Komik artists also had opportunities to go for a week to Haverford College in Philadelphia and visited New York. This is an important experience as the artists could observe the different situations of two other states in the United States. When they have been back to Indonesia, nothing they could say but "... someday I want to go back to San Francisco." At last, the *Sama-Sama/Together* project is really an important implementation of artist exchange. By choosing public space, namely the streets, as the medium of art practice, the artists could not only meet other art communities in a country but they could also make contact with people of the country. Art practice in public space is really an effective method for us in trying to eliminate all kinds of stereotype and learning to accept, understand, and give respect to differences. Besides, art collaboration between Indonesia and the US is rare so that this art project is mainly important for opening up possibilities of further collaborations between the two countries. This art project would be impossible without the kindness and support from those helping us to implement our initial idea. We would like to thank John Mc Glynn from the Lontar Foundation, Phillip Yampolsky from the Ford Foundation, Riley Sever from the United States Embassy, Asian Cultural Council, Intersection for the Arts, and the Kelola Foundation for their valuable support. This project is not only a program of artist exchange but, essentially, the effort of understanding the societies of different nations. This is an effort of great consequence when today our world is entrapped in protracted conflicts as every group likes to claim themselves the most rightful.

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