



gang re:Publik

indonesia-australia
creative adventures

Edited by
Alexandra Crosby, Rebecca Conroy, Suzan Piper & Jan Cornall

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CITY OF SYDNEY 

Alison Carroll

Indonesian journey

This is a personal tale, told after nearly forty years of engagement with Indonesian culture. It is written as I end my term of five years' membership of the Board of the Australia Indonesia Institute (AII), the people-to-people arm of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where I was the main arts person, though of course one of the group on all decisions made.

When asked to contribute to this publication, my reaction was to write about a particular Asialink project, but the editors said they wanted something personal about connections with Indonesia. I read the brief and was taken with the concept of *nongkrong*, hanging out and chatting in ways that matter, and it seemed to me that that was what I had been doing in my interaction with Indonesia for those nearly forty years. Indonesia has mattered to me and I've been in positions where I've tried to make it matter for others.

So, my story. Nearly forty years ago, in 1971 I was a young traveller arriving in central Jakarta in a becak from the old airport and six weeks later, after visiting TIM (Taman Ismail Marzuki Art Center), the dancers of the kraton in Yogya, Borobodur and Prambanan, the wooden ancestor figures of Tana Toraja (that journey was certainly a challenging one, including eating barely cooked pork in the villages, rude to refuse), arriving in the early days of hippy Bali. I remember Kuta with affection. I also remember the pressure of people and the demand for engagement. We were travelling very cheaply, a matter of pride in those days, which encouraged 'engagement' on a very direct level.

My professional arts life started really in Europe – doing post-graduate art historical research on 17th century Venice to be precise. A key change was a visit to Sri Lanka in 1981, long after that early Indonesian sojourn, when I realised how little I knew about the richness of that island culture. I started to do research on recent Southeast Asian art, curated an exhibition called *East & West* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and then got a grant from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council to travel to Southeast Asia in the late 1980s to see what might work in terms of exchange. I had a memorable meeting with an artist at TIM who said he wanted to see what was happening in the rest of the world NOW. They were powerful words. I curated and then managed the tour of an exhibition called *Art from Australia, Eight Contemporary Views* that was shown at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1990. (I managed the tour because no-one was interested or able to do it, and therefore I had to learn my trade as a tourer of exhibitions, in retrospect a very fortuitous occurrence.) Jenny Lindsay at the Australian Embassy was a strong supporter, and at her direction, the interior of the gallery was fitted with new white walls covering the existing columns and windows to show the works at their best. People said it looked like a ‘modern art gallery’. They remain to this day.

That tour was exciting; it was new ground; people were interested; it wasn't so hard to do. So, after that I worked more and more on engagement with Asian culture, and started the Asialink arts program in 1991. The experience of that show fed very strongly into what Jenny McGregor, CEO of Asialink, and I used when going to the funding bodies to ask for support. I went back to Indonesia to make contact, to look at venues, to ascertain partnerships, and professional possibilities.

Asialink's core program of artists in residence has continued since then, with three or four Australians spending up to four months working in Indonesia each year. The AII and the Australia Council are key funders, but also every State and Territory arts department is involved. This program has included some wonderful artists, in performing arts, arts management, visual arts and literature. It has also included a number of Indonesians coming back here.

From 1991-99 I was part of the Queensland Art Gallery's Asia Pacific Triennial team that met in Jakarta early on and visited numbers of artists' studios, held discussions with curators, and met people. Links developed with curators like Jim Supangkat that have remained strong ever since. Back in Yogya in 1993 I met and invited Heri Dono to have a major role in the 1994 Adelaide Festival exhibition program and he made a superb installation for that, as well as two hugely successful performances. It wasn't his first international gig, but it was an early one and it showed the focus and power of his work to a large audience here.

Asialink has also continued to send exhibitions to Indonesia, though not many. I always worried about how effective our visual arts exhibitions were there. I was at the National Gallery again in 1998 for a big opening of our *Patterning* show (a collaboration with Indonesian curators and artists) with a cast of important people, including Megawati Sukarnoputri. From an Australian Government point of view, this was a successful gig. But from my point of view, I worried that this was not the most effective way to make contact between Australia and Indonesia culturally. Our Australian impulse was to use these elite institutions but what if the majority of the population in Indonesia just didn't engage with them?

I looked at our options, including what sources of funding might exist. There was not an easy, obvious answer. The closest relationships that I could see were links between what our community arts practitioners did – outside the elite institutions, working with groups, within the 'community' – and the way Indonesian cultural practice worked. I went to the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council, led by Bernice Gerrand, and she held a series of meetings in 1999, and eventually agreed to support a three-year program of engagement with Indonesia. We formed a committee, advertised for expressions of interest, and were inundated. We had funds for around six projects, but we could have done thirty. The idea was to encourage and support projects where Indonesians and Australians worked together, outside the elite institutions, in the community. The slight disjuncture was the Australian-side desire to work WITH the community more obviously than what actually happened. But it happened enough. There was a diversity of project: a Jakarta/Sydney performance about working conditions of women in factories; a music and art project documenting the journey of the green turtle from Bali to northern Australia, a Java/Sydney performance manifested in Manly, a textile project between Sumatra and Perth, and a performance project based in Makassar. One project between Northern Australia and Sulawesi did not happen because of classic cultural difference: the Aboriginal communities involved twice had to delay their journey to Sulawesi because of deaths in the communities. In Muslim Sulawesi, where burial is very quick, they interpreted this as lack of commitment, and the project fell away. We produced a little booklet on this program called *Swimming with the Tide*. The Aboriginal project was an indication to me of the extra barriers in our scenario. We at Asialink were too small to carry such complexities: we simply did not have the funds to pay a project officer to wait out these sorts of culturally-based delays.

However, by this time I had been appointed to the AII Board, and was able to argue for a new program there, which we called *Saraswati*, to support more collaborative projects between Australian and Indonesian artists. It still carried the focus on people working together and on new creative, collaborative projects,

usually taking place outside the institutions, usually with a degree of energy and commitment that was absent from those more formal, exclusive events described before. It also took out the 'community' focus need of the old Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board, which had been slightly artificial. It still happened usually in the community, but it did not *need* that particular overlay, and it made it slightly more honest and also simpler. The program goes on. One of those projects funded has been Gang Festival.

Asialink continues our residency program in Indonesia. Our exhibition touring program has rarely included Indonesia, though as I write our *Streetworks* show of the work of Shaun Gladwell and Craig Walsh is about to open, again at the National Gallery. We are trying to make sure there is a good gig at the opening, with a DJ and projections on the outside walls, to make it as celebratory and performative as possible.

One other program Asialink runs supports Indonesian arts managers to come to Australia on internships. It was devised by others: particularly Jenny Lindsay again, then at the Ford Foundation in Jakarta, seeing the need for more arts management capacity in Indonesia, helped by the then Chair of our Performing Arts Advisory Committee at Asialink, Carrillo Gantner, and put into practice by Susan Strano, now at Regional Arts Victoria, but then Asialink's Performing Arts Manager. In 1999 Sue visited Indonesia and set up an agreement with the Ford Foundation to support internships for Indonesian arts managers in Australia in all art forms, and, to date, twenty people have spent time here on that program. We produced the little booklet *Jalan-jalan* documenting this.

Out of the relationship with the Ford Foundation came our current Nusa Tenggara Timur/Northern Territory (NTT/NT) project. Philip Yampolsky, who took over from Jenny Lindsay at Ford, saw what Australian Aboriginal cultural activity had achieved on an international stage, and we wondered if this example and structure could be usefully used in more remote areas of Indonesia. Eastern Indonesia, NTT became a focus, and we approached partners in the Northern Territory to work on this. The results come to fruition in the 2008 Darwin Festival: with new media works based on old forms from West Timor and music from Flores, made in association with NT and other Australian artists.

We are interested in this as a pilot program for Indonesian cultural workers, who have less access to international pathways, working with colleagues in Australia to engage with others more easily, more globally, across cultures. What it can do? Can we expand this example to other areas? We will see.

At this point, as my All time comes into focus, I look back with a major regret, and one more forward-looking thought. The regret is still Australia's tiny presence

culturally in Indonesia. We spend almost no money on it, and the travel advisories do not help (many public servants cannot travel to Indonesia to devise projects because of this). Indonesians ask me what has happened to our presence there, and I can only shrug. The Australia Council spends little money there and the AII spends around \$200,000 p.a. – for our nearest, large neighbour. This lack of money is sad. While on the AII, I put forward the idea of an Australian Cultural Centre in Yogya – as a focus for us Australians, and a cultural linking forum for activity throughout the archipelago, working like an NGO. The budget was possible: around \$200,000 for core program per annum, which I thought could be raised. The Myer Foundation for example had said come back and see them with a proposal. But there were concerns about security, and then the Embassy in Jakarta got bombed, and all thoughts of an Australian Centre in Indonesia moved from difficult to impossible.

A slightly more positive action, that I can do here, is hold a forum this year on Indonesian culture. It follows the idea that we just do not know enough here in Australia about Indonesian culture. Timed for July (2008) in Melbourne, it is about what is happening now, with a background on what has made it so. How exciting it is, what is possible, what energy exists. Its title is *Indonesia Calling – say no more*.

Information on the *Indonesia Calling* forum is on Asialink's website: www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au