

INVITATION TO A PICNIC

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Introduction.

This presentation is about different perceptions relating to video as opposed to documentary about art taking place in the public domain. The final transmission of such videos usually exists in the realm of alternative screenings and art galleries, rather than mainstream HDTV broadcast television, from whence they are usually excluded for technical reasons. This denies neither their validity as creative expression nor their place in the “industries” of either the arts or screen. In fact, my exploration of this subject was enabled by the non-acceptance of a proposal for an interactive television documentary which I had recently made to the ABC. I had not abandoned hope and had begun to recycle the idea towards work for an art exhibition which was to travel widely.¹ Furthermore, my participation as documentary filmmaker was offered in exchange for information provided me as a research scholar of contemporary documentary and experimental film and video in Indonesia.

If one had the time and/or inclination, it is possible to make several or many different videos of the same event depending on the viewpoints of those involved as creators, participants or spectators – or some work combining elements of all these positions - a panopticon. In this instance, I have limited my field of enquiry to an analysis of an actual work of performance art, as opposed to a work of performance which is (primarily) musical, movement-based or theatrically dramatic. This particular work, *Piknik Bersama Gelandangan/Picnic with Homeless People* by braided performance artist Iwan Wijono, was set within the context of a day’s journey around the metropolis of Jakarta. Besides the artist’s braids, considered as international cool in terms of my work with contemporary ethnographies, Iwan’s project interested me for several reasons. As an Indonesian-speaking researcher and filmmaker, it provided a rare opportunity to engage differently with people I rarely encountered and see how Indonesian artists and filmmakers approached and worked with this subject matter.

Piknik Bersama Gelandangan was part of the Public Art program for the 2001 June – July JakArt Festival, co-ordinated through the artists-run space *Ruang Rupa*. Founded by graduates of the Rijk’s University, Amsterdam, *Ruang Rupa* was part of a wide international network originating in the Netherlands.¹¹ I will simplify my discussion of *Piknik* and the videos made as its record from the standpoints of the various roles I occupied within the project. These were participating foreign guest in an art project, possible romantic tourist interest (despite my age), spontaneous crew member and documentary editor, and later as co-presenter and discussant at an international gathering of performance artists at the city-space house cum gallery, *Rumah Seni Air* in Jakarta in July 2001. I am now a filmmaker doing a Ph.D. rather than the designer, visual artist and arts administrator I once was.

Working as a team, Iwan, core members of *Ruang Rupa*, Anggung, Ade, Meta, Dewo and Indra, helped create the event. Subsequently, Iwan, Hafiz and I made two videos within a few days for the Seminar presentation. Most probably, these video sketches were the only outcome possible at the time, given short notice and unfamiliarity. I had not worked with Iwan before and had met Hafiz, a few days previously, in the course of my research. I met Iwan's team only on the day of filming, although it was evident the artist had already designed the event and picked the locations where we would find homeless people in numbers. The homeless, as so often happens, had been "cleaned" out of the city centre to improve Jakarta's attractiveness for its annual Birthday celebrations and for the JakArt Festival.

The first video was a 20 minute documentation of *Piknik* with a documentary focus, my particular skill and interest. My edit formed the spine for the shorter 10 minute version cut to the beat of a popular Latino song for workshop and Seminar presentation. In the latter, the artists' view of the aesthetic and social possibilities inherent in the performance event was heightened. They disrupted my precious continuity, occasionally overrode the speakers' voices which I had sought to privilege and applied effects to heighten the meanings they found in the material captured. I preferred to heighten the everyday magic already inherent in our combined footage. Mysteriously, I now seem to have lost the first two edits and wound up with a fusion which I don't like as much. However, all these videos may be considered interpretative. The stylistic difference is evident in the short clips accompanying this article.

Genesis of Piknik Bersama Gelandangan.

Still 1. Iwan explaining his project. (Jennifer)

Iwan was in search of an everyday aesthetic of simple, modern luxuries still unattainable for many Indonesians, and he had sponsorships to suit. He wanted to find an Indonesian equivalent of the ham sandwiches used by Mexican artist Pancho Lopez with whom he had recently worked on a similar project in Mexico City. Iwan always wondered about the lives of the people sleeping on the steps of the cathedral near his lodgings. However, this particular global template required local adjustment. Iwan required a fashionable and "luxurious" because globally "Westernised" food that Indonesian homeless people would normally not have access to - a "fantasy" food, which was fresh and also relatively nutritious. He sought the items for his set among the universal global products which exert their allure everywhere. In Jakarta, their proliferation in the omnipresent street markets exists in extreme contrast with the lives of the poor and homeless. Unlike, Pancho, Iwan, seeking a tourist metaphor, did not wear a business suit.

Stills 2.1, 2.2, & 2.3. Opening sequence introducing Rudi, Jalan Proklamasi. (Iwan & Hafiz)

A picnic is special - a chance to relax, have fun, and communicate. Iwan chose guests who would welcome this delivery to their always open doors. Even though Iwan's participants knew which restaurants had tasty bins by the backdoor and which hour was best for the richest pickings, this was a change from foraging or begging for food. Even more so, they welcomed the chance to share and communicate, Iwan's prime intention in staging these picnics. As a documentary-

maker, his approach reminded me of Jean Rouch's film where Rouch, the filmmaker, walks down a street asking people how they are. However, through the provision of the chairs, table and picnic food, Iwan's approach prompted greater engagement. Although Rouch's film was not Iwan's direct reference, it may have influenced Pancho Lopez who inspired this work.

Logistics

Initially, I was put off at the shiny new car provided for the project but accepted its practicality for the day. Secondly, I love lively colour but don't really like plastics. However, if the red plastic table and chairs we purchased were also biodegradable (which no-one could tell us), then to me, they were a reasonable choice. If not, and our video was to resemble a documentary, then, in the investigative mode, there might be an opportunity to suggest more. I queried Iwan's decision that the picnic food comprised hamburgers from McDonalds, and coca-cola and cigarettes from the supermarket. I am almost a vegetarian. As an environmentalist, I disapprove of the systems whereby McDonalds obtain their meat supplies; I don't like hamburgers, rarely drink coke and no longer smoke!

Clip 1. Iwan and team deciding on purchases. (Iwan, Jennifer & Hafiz)

But this was not my project. I had been asked to help record an art performance, not up my stakes and position in a film in progress. *Piknik Bersama Gelandangan* was Iwan's work, and the offer was made because of my skills and a desire to share. Iwan responded that we should discuss these matters in the seminar presentation and workshop. I subsequently raised the subject of privileging the voice of the film's subjects in the Seminar for general debate. I saw this as particularly important for the usually voiceless homeless in Jakarta. In the creation of a civil society, the problematics engendered by positionality in this project seemed to me symptomatic of a wider problem: how were *gelandangan* to be included in such discourses? Again, my perspective was that of a documentary filmmaker and researcher; Iwan's was that of an artist. We both sympathised with the condition of the poor and dispossessed, yet neither could escape the fact that we were creators of the simulacrally real in relation to the actual.

Approaches

The novelty of our mobile picnic, the food and attention made our participants feel relaxed, happy and talkative. However, we could barely hear or record conversations even with shotgun mikes at close range above the noise of the traffic roaring past our roadside in-situ interview sites, even if we were to have used lapel mikes. Our finished work would be hampered by bad sound quality. In the end, regardless of any information and insights we may have gleaned, and conveyed in documentary mode to viewers, *Piknik Bersama Gelandangan* was exactly that, a series of shared meals, and the warmth of human contact in the alienation of an enormous engulfing city in which we, the participants learned much. In the interests of art, and as individuals, the *gelandangan* seemed happy enough to be the centre of our attention and to be videoed talking. Normally, people rarely asked them their name, let alone their opinion. If they watched TV, it would be in shop windows. Already marginalised, and used to being moved on, it may be they had nothing to fear.

Clip 2 a & b. Veteran Usman in wheelchair. (Iwan & Hafiz; Jennifer & Hafiz)

Was there some prior selection of interviewees? I doubt not, or at least not by Iwan or myself. Possibly others in the team, more familiar with Jakarta, knew where to find particular groups of people. All seemed to be discovered at random, as we criss-crossed the city with our stowable picnics and digital video cameras. However, the last group in the park at night seemed to me to be too well-dressed and too articulate to be homeless – at least, until they told their story. Rudi, the first *gelandangan* we encountered was withdrawn, non-responsive and refused to leave his position on the curb. Anggung told me he was always in the same spot, and retreated to the garden of the house behind the curb whenever the police came by. Presumably, the householders gave him shelter. Rudi said nothing to Iwan for most of the picnic. He took a cigarette but neither ate nor drank. Poor Iwan! This first encounter was extremely uncomfortable. Feeling that we would only objectify our subjects, I dreaded the rest. Our positionality, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, age and gender, was all too clear in this instance, no matter how we tried to change the image. In both edits, our arrival with the picnic appears as the significant disturbance establishing the world of the subjects.

Clip 3. Iwan's aesthetic interpretation of Rudi and his dislocation from the world. (Iwan & Hafiz)

Next we encountered Pak Asep, who seemed comparatively well-dressed and well-educated. This poetic middle-aged man in a green-checked shirt had grown up in an institution, worked for many years, knew persecution, but in the end, decided he liked the free life. It was now too late to re-conform. In a strange way, the city was his. He entertained us in his space, to which we had brought the food.

Clip 4. Pak Asep with check shirt in canal-side park. (Iwan, Hafiz & Jennifer).

Absent-mindedly, I had left my sunglasses on the grass near Asep's mid-day resting spot. Many hours later in Taman Senopati, a park frequented by the homeless, we met him again, ready to bed down for the night. In a wonderful narrative twist, he returned my glasses. I had not remembered where I had left them. I gave him money and then worried greatly afterwards for his safety. He hadn't wanted to take it. Pak Asep's hamburger was partly eaten, neatly-wrapped and squirreled away inside a plastic bag with a towel, a comb, some other clothes and his sandals. He slid his pack back beneath his head as a pillow when we moved on.

Clip 5. Pak Asep at night in Taman Senopati. (Iwan, Hafiz and Anggung)

Before arriving at the park we had travelled quite some distance from Central Jakarta. Here we met an elderly lady, her thinning hair neatly rolled in a small pinned bun. Despite her frayed clothing, she had a sparrow-like elegance, enjoyed Iwan's attention as though she was having a meal in a nice café and was happy to tell him how she had come to Jakarta to look for her son. He had moved away from the last address she had for him and she became confused after that. Now she was living day to day, combing the city, hoping that somehow, she might just see him in the street. She had no idea where she was. Gradually, she had lost all her money, had sold her jewellery and had no place to go, a frequently-encountered story.

Still 3. Lili. (Jennifer & Hafiz)

Lili was in no hurry to leave her picnic, playing up to the camera and her

handsome companion. As camerapersons and crew, we became increasingly distracted by the events in the street around us. Children were playing with pigeons, others were skipping rope, a procession of street-cart vendors passed by and finally a train, bulging at the seams, its roof adorned with thrill-seeking illegal passengers, riding free. Impossible to police, they were travelling at their own risk (“*resiko sendiri*”), which was considered outside the province of Human Rights attention in 2001.

Clip 6. *Lili & Iwan in street with train.* (Iwan & Hafiz)

Our next encounter was with a talkative former ship’s engineer, who had emerged from an underpass as we drove by. He was enjoying the party, but suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and walked off into the night. Anggung spotted the reason before the rest of us: the police were cruising down the street on the lookout for troublemakers and illegally-present *gelandangan*. The two cameras are clearly distinguished by my use of the night-shooting function: Anggung’s footage, as in the park sequences, is green-tinged.

Clips 7 a & b. *“Inginiur” Sirait’s party and departure.* (Jennifer: Iwan & Hafiz)

The street lights were just turning on when we reached Taman Senopati, an immaculate green space to one side of a major arterial road. I waited in the car while Iwan and the crew went to see if we were in luck, and whether we needed to cart the table and chairs into this already well-provided space. Dewo, our driver, a quietly-spoken former student activist, began to tell me about the Tri-Sakti demonstrations in 1998. He had never recovered from the deaths of his friends, he said, and had lost his desire to study. His sadness shows through in my images of the team together.

Style and its conflicts

We set up in the middle of the park. Three people approached us. To me, they had stepped straight out of a Dede Eri Supria painting and into the set created by the park benches, the dark shapes of the trees, soft grass and sparkling lights of the park.

Plate 1.

The trio adopted familiar positions on the benches of their night home, inviting us to join them. They carefully placed their purchased as opposed to found bags besides them, with such precision I thought they might be actors. Our crew sat on the ground in the pool of light in front and slightly to one side of them, like a group of characters in a crowd scene from a Wayang Orang play. It was now silent and we could record conversations clearly. Together with the magical atmosphere of Taman Suropati, the palace of the *gelandangan*, this gave my documentary filmmaking soul great pleasure.

Clips 8 a & b. *Park scene.* (Iwan, Hafiz and Jennifer; Jennifer & Hafiz) *The extension of this scene comes from my edit.*

Pak Dirman and his friends were articulate day-labourers who had been unable to find continuous work and so had lost their rented lodgings. They understood how they were affected by the dynamic of changing economic conditions in the metropolis which had become their home and wished to discuss this subject. Neat, clean and undeterred, they cheerfully decamped to their spot in the park whenever necessary. Fascinated by the clarity of the information

provided, I extended this sequence in edit, whereas in the work of Iwan & Hafiz, it is brief. Their choice proved to be a point of contention in later discussion, as it highlighted differentiations between the respective emphases of works of art and observational and investigative documentary.

When shooting *Piknik*, there was no distanced and relatively objective recording of the event using a fixed position camera, the stance most often used to document performance art. Instead, the two cameras involved were always hand-held, very mobile and engaged, with shots varying from close-up (although rarely extreme close-up), to mid-shot, to distant, then creatively arranged in edit. I made sure I covered the range while Anggung concentrated on what was important to him. He frequently chose to include all parties and their location in the frame, not only the action between Iwan and his respective guests. Together with cutaways selected from the surroundings, the latter was my focus. You can tell our cameras in the mix.

The aesthetic was the slightly rough and ready one favoured by Indonesian traditions of verite encapsulated in the form of *Sinema Rush Copy*, born from taking the camera into the streets, and living among the people to better observe their experience (Prakosa, 1997:167-171). It is low budget filmmaking, well-suited to handycam video. Into this, we blended interviews which I was keen to retain, despite their poor sound quality, but which Iwan, as an artist could more easily dispense with. His was primarily an aesthetic focus aiming to capture the experience in feeling as opposed to a too literal meaning, although as a Yogyakarta artist, his field of artistic interest and instruction was society. In this instance, and in terms of an application of theory and philosophical intent, it would have been wonderful to involve the subjects in editing their sequences from a non-literal, interpretative point of view.

I must stress that this represents my opinion, derived from an industry and community media standpoint, and was not Iwan's at the time. Furthermore, the *gelandangan* were not even interested in seeing themselves on screen, let alone engaging in further participation. Both Iwan and I did try to get Pak Asep to the seminar. It seems his deferral was still based on their sense of societal place despite the huge changes of *Reformasi*.ⁱⁱⁱ In edit, I used few extra special effects, beyond those used when shooting, but Hafiz was keen to play with more of these for interpretative reasons. The temporal discontinuities in the second edit are an example. Most of these interventions were intended to heighten Iwan's understanding of the truth expressed as feeling in the sequences selected, a point made when co-presenting the piece and discussing our different approaches and expectations of the material. His aesthetic intentions were clear, as were my investigative ones in the structural framework of the first edit.

Conclusion.

The *Rumah Seni Air* presentation was moderated by Indonesian graphic and installation artist Harsono and Nick DeoCampo from the Mowell Film Institute in the Phillipines. The discussion revealed several differences regarding the expectation and dissemination of ideas related to documentary filmmaking practice in Indonesia, evident in the comparative short clips accompanying this article. Despite media freedom, I suggest there was also considerable hesitancy regarding the presentation of problematic subject matter in the public domain. Those concerned were certainly still nervy about this at the screening of *Perbatasan/Boundaries* for Lucia Hartini's "*Irama Kehidupan/Spirit of Life*"

exhibition which opened in Jakarta seven months later (late January 2002).^{iv} Why might this be so?

Since 2001, freedom of expression had also opened the door for vitriolic expressions of professional jealousy spurred on by fears that intellectual change might be moving too far too fast.^v Arguably, for Indonesians, there is a residual fear of the power of the directly-captured realistic simulacral image, so providing a reason for the distortion of images in edit. Take but don't take too much without agreement. This shift to the second degree of representation represents an important, and sometimes necessary step, re-admitting magic to the world of the representationally real, while removing such imagery to the world of art. This documentary format was rejected by the artists, who favoured the expressive looseness of experimental video, and the interventions and visual and temporal transformations of their aesthetic as their record of the work.

It contrasts with my interpretation of *Piknik Bersama Gelandangan* in edit, where I incorporate flashes of visual magic within the documentary format, working with what is there in the footage. For me, the record of Iwan's work was a journey with an unfamiliar focus around a metropolis, which I used to gain information about the lives of the marginalised and a focus for another *Braided Lives* video. Having tackled a heavy slab of the real in our respective and still unfinished ways, Iwan, Ruang Rupa and I parted friends and went on to do other things. And perhaps Anggung also achieved his intention – to keep the issue of Jakarta's homeless people alive.

Endnotes

ⁱ My small installation with less than the intended complement of *Braided Lives* videos is in the exhibition *Tracking Cloth*, curated through the Wollongong City Gallery and the University of Wollongong and currently touring New South Wales.

ⁱⁱ In July 2001, Hafiz, co-ordinator of *Ruang Rupa* said of their artist-run space and their network, "We wanted to make something different to suit our questioning kind of art because of the changes in Indonesia".

ⁱⁱⁱ I think we may have been able to interest the trio of day-labourers to the screening had we found them again and had they been free in the middle of the day. The blanket refusal came from the check-shirted poet who chose not to attend when invited, despite his sophisticated opinions.

^{iv} *Perbatasan/Boundaries* includes a sequence concerning family violence and its causalities, a rarely seen subject in Indonesian cinema and television. The presentation is indirect, using drama and substantial visual interventions. Since 2002, various previously well-respected art critics have been attacked in newspapers like *Kompas* for stances seen as conflictual with particular power groups in the arts, despite their years of support for many artists across the board in Indonesia. Arguably, these attacks represent the first attempts to test legislation regarding defamation in the public domain, given press freedom.

^v At one stage, it was suggested we use the cover of "technical difficulty" regarding the absence of dialogue in the shorter clip, a clear indication of possible trouble. In Jakarta, *Gelandangan* were still regarded as lumpen proletariat without opinions – let alone concerning questions of governance. Like the riders on the roof of the train, they have been left to make their own choices. The *Rumah Seni Air* seminar was an international cultural forum and our contributions were also being videoed. However, I spoke carefully, from the point of an Australian documentary filmmaker wishing to express opinions, and was backed up by Nick and by Sue Ingham, a fellow researcher from Australia, who adopted the "voice of the ABC" position in her comments.