

“SEMUA TEMPAT SEKOLAH”

Creative communities in Java

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Introduction

The title of this talk is taken from this illustration in a book by community activist and writer Roem Topatimasang. The book is called “School is an Addiction”, and the comic describes a time before formal schooling was introduced to Indonesia, when every place was school, and every person was a teacher. I must admit, I have not read the book fully, but I chose the expression as a title because this concept, and the book that discusses it, were cited repeatedly by members of the organizations I will be discussing here.

In 2010 I travelled to Java on an Asia link residency, investigating arts programming for families and children. Hosted by Indonesian Visual Art Archives, I intended to examine how arts institutions were programming for children and families, on what pedagogies their work was based, how programs were developed and evaluated. Instead I encountered community based practices that regard arts and culture as an educational tool, and grass-roots activity aimed at filling perceived gaps in a formal education system seen to be focused on quantitative assessment and rote learning. This paper discusses experiences and observations from my residency, foregrounding four innovative projects: Anak Wayang Indonesia, Sekolah mBrosot, S14, and Tlatah Bocah.

Through these initiatives I will demonstrate a revitalization of the arts as a source of education and community cohesion. Is this revitalization led or imposed by an educated middle-class, in a contested imagining of contemporary

Indonesian culture? How can organizations successfully collaborate within the communities they seek to engage?

Anak Wayang Indonesia

Anak Wayang Indonesia (AWI) has long been established as a cultural support network for children and young people. Founded in 1998, AWI strive to provide stimulating, educational and constructive activities in urban areas along the river Code in Yogyakarta. Through performance and art, they enact didactic social welfare interventions with the young people in their communities. When I visited, activities were focused on Juminahan and Jagalan areas, through guided programs for older children, and an 'open house' next to the Rumah Susun where younger children could gather for workshops, use a computer or read from the collection of books.

AWI also publishes a small magazine with articles written by participants, regarding topics introduced by facilitators. Although many of the activities are creative or cultural, AWI's director, Vini Oktaviani Hendayani explained that they do not regard themselves primarily as a children's arts organization. Rather, she identified children's rights, health and education, and building capacity for self-expression as goals. Art in this context is a tool for introducing these concepts.

Last year I saw this process unfold during the rehearsals and performance of a Ketoprak play. The play was chosen specifically for its anti-violence message. A professional ketoprak actor was hired to direct and coach the older children towards a professional outcome. A core group were regular attendees of rehearsals, and two AWI facilitators (who are called pendamping) were present throughout in a support role. Meanwhile, younger children would occasionally gather at the open house, either spontaneously or for 'meetings' publicized by hand written and distributed invitations.

According to Vini, AWI intends to avoid the externalized model of an NGO, and be a member of the community. This is achieved by locating facilitators in the field, submitting written proposals for programs to the RW and RT for their approval, and inviting parents and children to give feedback. Programs also include support workshops for parents, facilitated by AWI staff and

conducted by experts such as health workers.

“We encourage the neighborhood community to work together, map the roots of the problems at their level and encourage them to actively find a solution for their problems. We don’t “teach” communities, because the communities already possess a wealth of experience and great intelligence. ... As far as the “values” which we bring, they have to be adjusted to the values that exist in the community. And this strategy can minimalise friction which can otherwise occur.”

Sekolah mBrosot

Sekolah mBrosot’s first mission was literacy, establishing a library from a private collection of children’s literature. Now they regularly run theatre, dance and visual art workshops facilitated by practicing artists. In September 2010 when I first visited Sekolah mBrosot, artist and facilitator Risky was staying in the library three or four nights a week, spending the days preparing for an upcoming exhibition of the children’s work. Enthusiastic children dropped by regularly to work on their creative projects. Another facilitator, Yanto, lives there permanently. Their commitment to their work with the children was admirable.

Another thing I was moved by during my visits to Sekolah mBrosot was the daily visits of a mother and her three children aged four and under. Ibu brang the little ones from their house behind the library; the eldest two would flick through books while their mother and baby sat watching. In our conversations, Ibu revealed how isolated she felt, juggling day and night with such tiny children, away from her family while her husband worked.

In Australia we hear an idealized version of raising children in Asian communities, in which family and community are supposedly always available, supporting women in their role as mothers. Instead, this young woman was experiencing the same isolation I have felt raising children in a “Western” community. It struck me that this library offered a sanctuary for her, another world for her children, who were revelling in the joys of early exposure to books.

But it has not always been easy for the Sekolah mBrosot team to integrate into the community they want to serve. According to members of the team, finding their place as a group and as individuals in the community is their

biggest challenge. “We are still regarded as guests in the community” Tensions have arisen on religious grounds, when some community members perceived infractions. Another member of the team described it to me thus: “Religion becomes an issue in social life when it exists in the formal level. Sekolah mBrosot’s problem with tensions between religions began when entering the formal structures of society. Understanding when Sekolah mBrosot needs to act as an organization and when the people of Sekolah mBrosot need to act as social individuals in a community, is very important to know. It becomes a kind of social mapping”

S14

S14 operates in suburban Bandung, run by artist Herra Pahlasari. From her home, she facilitates exhibitions and public programs for children and adults in her middle-class neighborhood. Programs are grounded in engagement with art and artists.

In late 2010 galleries across Bandung held a series of exhibitions called “Sang Ahli Gambar dan Kawan-kawan”, celebrating the work of Indonesian master painter and “father of modernism”, Soedjojono. S14’s response was to involve their neighbors, who previously had little interest in art or knowledge of the painter’s work.

Through a series of public programs and workshops, students from a Cigadung Preschool and housewives from the Cigadung health centre (PKK) visited Galeri Soemardja, which exhibited Soedjojono’s drawings, and the Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, which exhibited contemporary responses to Soedjojono. As well as listening to curatorial and artist talks, these two groups of largely first-time gallery visitors returned to S14 to create drawing and embroideries in response to their experience. In December, their work was exhibited in a “Tribute Sudjojono Workshop Exhibition”.

By bringing S14’s own neighbors into the art space, it encourages them to feel ownership of its activities. S14 becomes their local gallery. The experience introduces these groups, to ‘high art’ in a co-constructivist, social, environment – they develop responses to the artworks together with their peers, but with the benefit of ‘expert’ guidance. The workshop process deepens the participant’s

engagement and demystifies the creative process. The whole process deconstructs other art history paradigms, including the dominance of the male gaze and the ‘artist as genius’. Here, the women and children of Cigadung become artists, critics, experts. Art is no longer the domain of the ‘other’, it becomes something they can have dominion over.

It may seem that S14’s focus on the socialization of art is a completely different goal from those of the other organizations I have discussed. But I see the activities of S14 as the same kind of community building as performed by the other organizations, albeit in a middle-class, well-educated suburb. S14 engages creatively with established community units, breaking down gender and age roles in regards to high art. Most importantly it is embedded geographically and socially in its surroundings: it is of its place.

Tlatah Bocah

Tlatah Bocah is based in Muntilan and engages largely with economically disadvantaged children on the slopes of Mt Merapi. Their goal is to create a space for children to play and explore their creativity, in collaboration with their communities. Key in Tlatah Bocah’s mission is increasing younger generations’ understanding of their own cultural traditions, but as these images show, these are sometimes traditions re-invented and re-imagined. For the past few years, Tlatah Bocah have held a children’s arts festival which showcases performance and visual arts developed by different communities. Each community decides their own direction; participants, choreography, music, costume, cultural references and what kind of commitment is required of participants. Some take it very seriously; the children you see here rehearsed daily until late at night, for four or more hours at a time.

These kind of intergenerational community performing groups are far from uncommon in and around Yogyakarta. What distinguished Tlatah Bocah for me were the events in the aftermath of the volcanic eruptions that occurred around this time last year. Tlatah Bocah’s team were first evacuees and then evacuators. In the increasing chaos, many communities’ first contact was with Tlatah Bocah, who directed and drove vehicles, assisted authorities to find remote communities and encouraged reluctant individuals to leave. Like many,

they set up a posko, distributing aid to refugee camps that authorities were yet to reach. In the following months, they regularly visited the very elderly and mentally ill who had been left behind. In the recovery phase, they coordinated gotong royong to clean up ash. When families began to move back home, Tlatah Bocah initiated a “chicken scholarship” where people made a small donation to provide a child with a chick to raise, training children in animal rearing, responsibility, economic management and collaborative farming.

This kind of social intervention exemplifies the success of Tlatah Bocah and other community cultural organizations. Their integration into the community and their willingness to facilitate expression of the values of that community, allows them to operate effectively. That established trust also gives them the flexibility to operate outside their normal parameters, to step in where NGO’s and state authorities do not have the local knowledge or relationships to penetrate. It is a positive example of civil society in action, an example I saw repeated in so many outstanding instances during the 2010 eruptions.

In his thesis on *Taman Bacaan* in Indonesia, Stian Haklev indicated that several individuals had raised the prospect that reading gardens are mostly set up by the educated middle-class, in the process merely perpetuating class-divides. I propose a parallel likelihood of this occurring among community-oriented arts groups in Indonesia; there is always the danger of imposing values on a community that does not share or need them.

In the Modern age (capital M), desire to create universal values has failed to recognize the importance of diversity to any and all systems. We know that ecological systems fail when their diversity is compromised, but we are only beginning to recognize that different sets of social values can co-exist and indeed, build a stronger, more resilient society. While literacy is very important, not everyone needs or wants a tertiary education. Contemporary and traditional arts are integral to cultural expression; communities need to be involved deeply in creating that expression.

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