



ART JOG AND INDONESIA'S NEW ART PUBLIC

Katherine Bruhn

Ph.D Student
South and Southeast Asian Studies
University of California Berkeley

ABSTRACT

In the last two decades Indonesia's contemporary art world has experienced exponential growth—the result of a political shift in 1998 known as Reformasi and the impact of an art market boom in the mid-2000s. Indonesia now boasts a plethora of galleries, biennials, and large-scale art events. Of particular importance is an annual art fair known as Art Jog now in entering its ninth iteration. Held in the city of Yogyakarta, Art Jog is described as a “bottom-up art fair” organized by and for artists. It has become a highly anticipated event attended by international and domestic collectors, gallerists, art practitioners, and observers as well as the general public who are rarely present at other art events. By examining the history and position of Art Jog in comparison with Indonesia's other biennials, this paper will analyze the significance of more “spectacular” events like Art Jog in the development of a “new art public” in Indonesia.

The Proliferation of Biennials, Art Fairs, and Mega-Exhibitions in Indonesia's Art World

In the last two decades, the number of large-scale art exhibitions held throughout the world has expanded exponentially. Since the 1990s the number of biennials has reached—according to some estimates—as many as 200, while the number of art fairs (large and small) in cities ranging from Singapore to Miami is not far behind.^[1] In Southeast Asia this trend has been particularly pronounced in Indonesia where there are currently five contemporary art biennials, approximately three-medium specific biennials, three annual art fairs, and a number of other large-scale events that happen on an annual or biannual basis such as Ruang Rupa's OK Video Festival.^[2] The number of sites in which contemporary artists both emerging and established can display their work has proliferated over the last twenty years, making the experience of young artists, as well as their audiences, much different than that of their predecessors who, until the late 1990s, experienced political repression and a rather hostile "art climate" under Suharto's 31-year authoritarian New Order regime, which lasted from 1965 – 1998.

While the significance of such mega-exhibitions, in particular biennials, are recognized due to the nature of these sites as some of the most vital and visible locales for the production, distribution, and generation of public discourse around contemporary art. They are more commonly critiqued for their spectacular nature that is argued to undercut the critical autonomy of art practices or confuse the boundary of

what is meant by local, national, regional, or transnational art. In the introduction to an anthology intended to examine the form of the biennial in contemporary global art discourse it is asked, "is the biennial an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture...a Western typology whose proliferation has infiltrated even the most far-reaching parts of the world, where such events are little more than entertaining or commercially driven showcases?" Or (on a more positive note) is the biennial form, "a platform—like perhaps no other art institution before it—for grappling with such issues as politics, race, identity, globalization, and post-colonialism in art-making and –showing today?"^[3] It is in relation to questions raised by both biennials and other mega-exhibitions that share similarities that I argue it is relevant to examine such growth within a national art world – a task that is less often taken up as a topic of analysis in comparison to the examination of global events like the Venice Biennial, Documenta, or the various iterations of Art Basel. In a site like Indonesia where for decades, as Amanda Rath states, "government intervention and scrutiny of the arts...made it difficult for artists to gain the necessary permits to exhibit" and "...artists wanting to make a counterargument to official policy or to make social commentary had little choice but to work outside official and national institutions" the presence of myriad large-scale art events contributes to an exciting new arts context.^[4] While there has been an increase in government support for the arts in the form of local funding for events, it appears that these events remain less attractive to a general audience in comparison to more spectacular,

privately funded affairs. This paradox raises a significant question. What is it that attracts a general audience, defined as individuals not already immersed in art world networks, to a large-scale exhibition, (potentially) contributing to greater appreciation for contemporary arts? It is with a desire to look at the impact of Indonesia's mega-exhibitions on the development of a more general art public that this paper takes as its focus the examination of not one of Indonesia's numerous biennials but rather an annual event held in the city of Yogyakarta, known as Art Jog.

Indonesia's "Bottom-Up" Art Fair: Art Jog

Entering its 9th iteration in 2016, Art Jog is, at its core, a commercial art fair; however, it remains fundamentally different than more familiar art fairs like Art Basel. Described by its organizers as "bottom-up," Art Jog highlights artists instead of galleries. It is curated, includes commissioned works, lasts approximately three weeks, and incorporates parallel events such as discussions, studio visits, a young artist's award, and special "presentations" that have involved the display of internationally acclaimed artists including Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono. These characteristics, along with the event's professional execution, suggest significant parallels with Indonesia's biennials, which seek to examine and produce discourse regarding the state of contemporary art both nationally and internationally.

When Art Jog was first conceived in 2008, just a year after Indonesia's art market "boom," its organizers sought to fill a perceived void—namely a site for and by artists where artwork could be made available to both national and international collectors and where artists would be given the opportunity to learn about the mechanisms of the market. Since 2008, Art Jog has come to rival Indonesia's numerous biennials that have nearly tripled in number over the same time span. There are now three biennials on Indonesia's central island of Java held in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and East Java, as well as two on Indonesia's outer islands including Sumatra and Sulawesi. Amongst all of these events that claim some stake in the articulation of Indonesia's recent contemporary art history, I argue, that of particular significance to Art Jog's success has been its ability to draw the attention of what anthropologist Doreen Lee refers to as Indonesia's "post-political generation," the segment of Indonesia's population comprised of individuals (aged 14 – 25) who have come of age since the end of Suharto's 31-year authoritarian New Order Regime.^[5] While Indonesia's most recent biennial, held from mid-November to mid-January of this year (15 November – 17 January) drew a crowd of 30,000 over the course of 8 weeks, Art Jog 2014 attracted approximately 100,000 attendees in just 3 weeks.^[6] Yet, despite Art Jog's success, this event has received numerous critiques mostly relating to its commercial nature. This critique, in the context of Indonesian contemporary art's recent economic and commercial development, warrants attention. In order to narrow the central inquiry of this

analysis I ask: what is it about the presentation of Art Jog that attracts more viewers than Indonesia's other biennials, events perceived by many of Indonesia's art world mediators to be more credible sites for the production of critical discourse than a commercial event like Art Jog?

In order to explore this question this paper invites you to experience Art Jog as I have the last two years. By touching most specifically on the growth and change of this exhibition's annual commissioned work – an installation that takes over the façade of the exhibition hall – I intend to demonstrate the nature of Art Jog and the way in which its public has become an important facet of its execution.

Through this discussion I suggest that Art Jog's success has been influenced by the awareness of its organizers and their ability to cater the presentation of Art Jog to Indonesia's post-political generation, ultimately resulting in the production of a new

channel for the circulation of critical discourse surrounding contemporary art. As I will describe, this new channel is virtual, produced through the photo-sharing platform, Instagram.



Figure 1: Taman Budaya Yogyakarta.

Join me at Art Jog

A visit to Art Jog begins at the entrance to Taman Budaya, the site of this annual art fair [figure 1]. Taman Budaya, literally “cultural park” in Indonesian, is Yogyakarta's government-owned cultural center. This site, located strategically in the heart of the city, is less than a mile from the sultan's palace, just behind the city's oldest market of Beringharjo, and along the central

artery of Yogyakarta known as Jalan Malioboro. Its complex includes a large exhibition space, a performance hall, and offices that house various art related organizations. Built during the era of Dutch colonial control, these buildings are

relatively unassuming and in slight disrepair; it is during events like Art Jog that they are brought to life. This transformation is most pronounced by the annual commissioned installation which takes over the exhibition hall's façade, effectively erasing any trace of the building's colonial heritage [figure 2].

As one of Indonesia's primary art centers, Yogyakarta is home to myriad galleries and cultural spaces. Due to the density of artists and the high-rate of art production in this city, it often seems that on any given night one can find an art opening. On Friday and Saturday nights especially, it is not uncommon for artists and their peers to jump from opening to opening. As a result, openings are never really that crowded. At times you will even hear the complaint that there are simply too many exhibitions to be interesting anymore. In this saturated context it is particularly astounding to consider the number of attendees that show up on Art Jog's opening night. In 2015 it is estimated that approximately 20,000 people gathered in front

of Taman Budaya, surpassing the previous year, which saw closer to 15,000.[7] Since its inception eight years ago a precedent has been set for Art Jog. Each year must be bigger, better, and more complex than the last. Having attended this

event regularly since 2010, I have witnessed this development – reflected most directly through the development of its commissioned installations. I have seen these installations grow to become more interactive and better synchronized with the attention of Art Jog's audience. This year's installation, by the husband and wife duo Indieguerillas, was without a doubt the most engaging commission yet.

Playing off the literal translation of Taman Budaya as "Cultural Park," Indieguerillas designed a dome covered in live

plants with a small waterfall on its exterior in order to create a park-like green space [figure 3]. To enter Art Jog attendees had to pass through this dome in which they encountered eight interactive works, fashioned as bicycles or *becak*



Figure 3: Installation by Indieguerillas for Art Jog 2015.

(rickshaws) [figure 4]. These pieces were each designed around a particular theme that made reference to traditional culture and perceived problems of contemporary society. In the evenings they were brought to life by individuals and local communities who manned each piece, in order to invite attendees to participate in whatever activity that bicycle offered. For example, one bicycle was fashioned as a mobile kitchen while next to it was another bicycle that served as a place to eat, aptly titled *Face Off Dinner* [figure 5]. This piece features two seats separated by a partition that contains two video screens. On each screen a video was a projection of the individual seated on the opposite side, intended as a critique of our obsession with devices even during mealtimes. In order to both inform and instruct attendees, next to each bicycle was a placard that included not only a short description of the work but also various symbols representative of social media platforms and a QR code, linked to a website that provided a schedule of events associated with each bicycle.



Figure 5: *Face off Dinner* by Indieguerillas at Art Jog 2015

On my first visit to Art Jog 2015 I was struck by the strategy and affect of not only Indieguerilla's installation but also the overall exhibition. Indieguerilla's green dome served as a tranquil gateway to what became an overwhelming experience. With a desire to create an exhibition that included only interactive or intermedia art, this year's Art Jog entitled "Infinity in Flux" was comprised almost entirely of three-dimensional intermedia works with the exception of one painting.[8] As a result, lights, sounds, and the flicker of moving objects constantly confronted the viewer as she twisted through the exhibition that was laid out rather illogically as a series of long corridors with various rooms and small nooks throughout. As the curatorial remarks in the exhibition's catalogue state, "The theme 'Infinity in Flux' was partly inspired by visitors of the previous Art Jog who incessantly took selfie snapshots with the artworks they found appealing. Although this behavior may seem 'disruptive' to some – it also shows their need to be 'close' to art." [9] I argue that Art Jog's organizing committee

not only successfully brought art closer to its attendees through the production of a sensorial experience but also strategically honed in on the engagement of its audience via social media. It is here that I would like to take you back to Art Jog 2014, the moment at which I also noticed a significant shift in the makeup of Art Jog's audience and this audience's engagement.

Identity Construction via Selfie

While I was not in attendance at the opening of Art Jog 2014, I was eager to see how the curatorial team had taken up the theme "Legacies of Power." Held approximately one month before Indonesia's second ever democratic election, the exhibition promised a significant opportunity to observe how Indonesia's art world, 17 years after the end of Suharto's New Order regime, was interpreting and responding to both Indonesia's political past and future. While I was struck by the commission that greeted me when I arrived to Taman Budaya,

I was more struck by a new phenomenon, namely the incessant need to take selfies or photographs in front of artworks and the use of the selfie stick, which in Indonesian is referred to as the *tongkat narsis*, best translated as "narcissist stick" [figure 6].



Figure 6: Selfies at Art Jog 2014 in front of commissioned installation

Of course the selfie is now quite familiar; however, in 2014 this was like nothing I had witnessed before. While I was intently reading the well-stated captions next to each artwork it seemed that everyone around me was more interested in finding the best angle from which to take a photograph, not of the artwork itself but rather of themselves in front of that art work [figure 7]. I was made aware later that attendees were taking these selfies in order to upload to Instagram as part of an audience contest that had been advertised at the exhibition's ticket booth.

Despite that for the first time Art Jog 2014 charged an entrance fee of Rp. 10,000 (at the time approximately USD \$1.10), overall attendance was higher than ever before. Many young attendees, ranging from high school students to recent

university graduates stated that they had heard of Art Jog as a result of a photo uploaded by a friend to Instagram. After seeing these photos they too wanted to take part in this event.

This interest in the projection of self via social media is reflective of what Doreen Lee argues to be a “constant urge to document, circulate, and interpret representations of self on social media [an act that is now] a visible element in the formation of urban Indonesian subjectivities.”^[10] Art Jog’s manipulation of this trend both in 2014 (and on a much more massive scale in 2015) demonstrates both a familiarity with their young (post-political) audience and a strategic move reflective of a desire to attract an even wider contingent of the young. While other social media sites in Indonesia are arguably more popular (for example, Indonesia is said to have one of the largest number of both Facebook and Twitter users in the world), the choice to utilize Instagram as a platform for audience engagement ensured more immediate participation. In comparison to other photo sharing platforms, Instagram is

unique as it enables users to take and manipulate photos with the mobile application itself and then instantly post them. As described in a study on the use of Instagram in museums, “the fact that Instagrams [sic] are mostly shared live, during the

event that the photos are taken, makes it possible for [a] community to provide synchronous commentary.”^[11] I suggest that such a “community” engaged with a particular set of Instagram posts might be compared to a “public” brought into being by its relationship to the circulation of a “text” such as that described by Michael Warner. While the type of text that Warner refers to in his work “Publics and Counterpublics” is arguably a more standard written text, I extend the use of this term, identifying posts on Instagram as a type of text. When tagged with a particular “hashtag”

these texts become a cohesive body. These texts form a relation among strangers that is both impersonal and personal. Their relevance is constituted through the attention of those who respond or utilize the same hashtag. Presently,

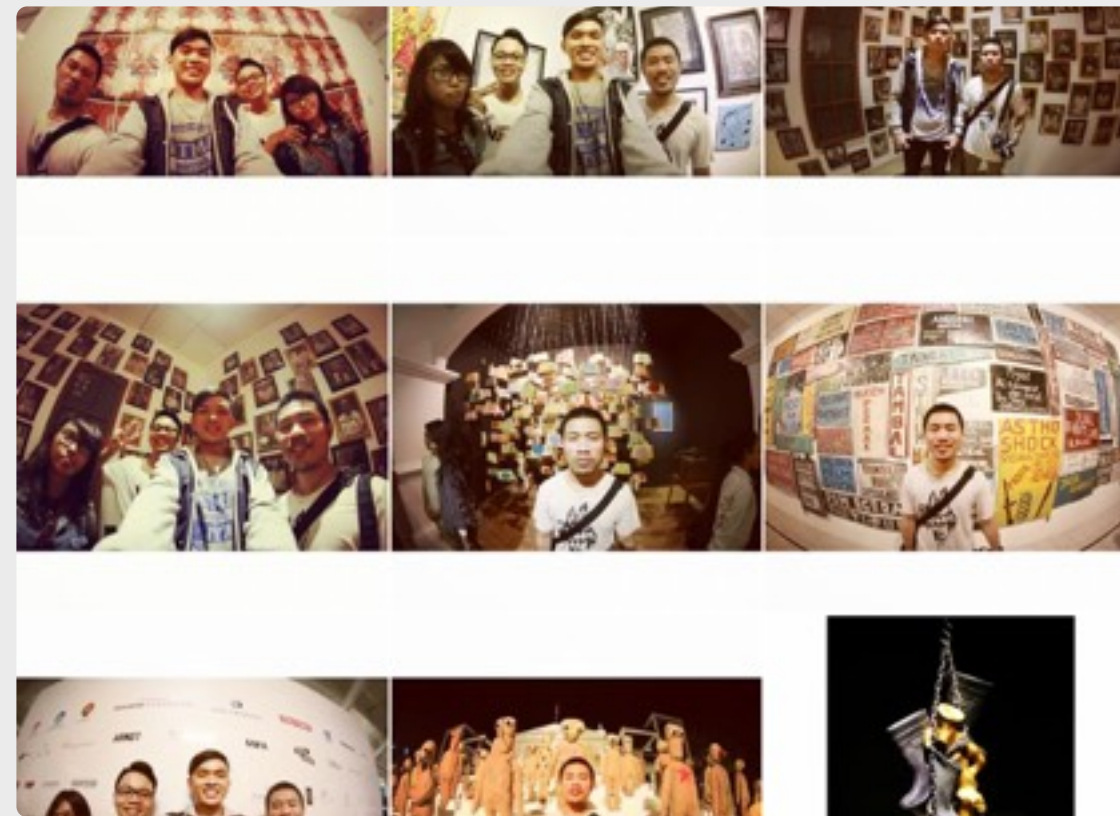


Figure 8: An example of a “cohesive text” or Art Jog’s archive, Screenshot taken from Instagram.

there are close to 16,000 posts that use a hashtag associated with Art Jog 2014, creating a sort of virtual archive [figure 8]. [12]

An initial survey of these posts suggests that a seemingly large majority are selfies taken by attendees in front of artworks while another large subset display an artwork in isolation. Comments given with posts also vary. Some provide the title of a work while others include statements that have no obvious connection to the work itself but rather reflect an element of the viewer's reaction to that work. Ultimately what these posts demonstrate is that the remediation of the work of art via Instagram leads to new meanings other than those originally intended by the work's producer. On the idea of remediation, anthropologist Karen Strassler states, "A shift in the media 'habitat' of the image and the channels by which it travels...will change the image's mode of address, its publics, and the protocols of use and interpretation by which its meanings are produced." [13] This is in line with what theorist David Joselit's describes as the "neoliberal" approach to the circulation of art, in which "images are dislocated from their original site and enter 'networks where they are characterized by motion, either potential or actual, and are capable of changing format—of experiencing cascading chains of relocation and remediation.'" [14]

The re-appropriation of artworks displayed at Art Jog via Instagram is of course not unique to this event or even Indonesia. What was unique, however, in the context of Indonesia was the response to this phenomenon by Art Jog's

organizers. By creating an exhibition in 2015 that was almost entirely interactive Art Jog created a space that encouraged this new form of participation for its public. It created a sort of "relational exhibition" encouraging the production and circulation of discourse via an unlikely platform, Instagram. [15]

The Price of Art Appreciation

It is thus that I return to a reflection on this event's initial intent – to create a space by and for artists to display their work while somehow learning about the mechanisms of the market. In 2008, this goal held significance for young artists who had little exposure to the international art market. Fast-forward seven-years and the focus seems no longer on educating artists but rather engaging a growing public, comprised largely of young people, members of Doreen Lee's post-political generation. This group is not necessarily apolitical but rather, as she states, "politically engaged in a new and disordered way...cognizant of and responding to the globalized terms of how citizenship is idealized in similar terms to how the emergent middle classes' techniques of self in post-socialist regimes have incorporated neoliberal ideas while remaining embedded in broader moral and cultural frameworks." [16]

Yet, despite the success of Art Jog in its ability to attract members of Indonesia's largest demographic and successfully spark their interest in contemporary art, Art Jog remains at its

core an art fair. It is a commercial event that depends on the sale of art for its continued success. Although it suggests a primary parallel with Indonesia's biennials, namely the exploration and further institutionalization of Indonesian contemporary art, it is not a biennial, which is presumably focused on the production of discourse rather than the commodification of art and the accumulation of profit. This interest in revenue, extracted from Art Jog's audience was arguably the most contested aspect of Art Jog 2015. Instead of Rp. 10,000, this year's entrance fee was raised to Rp. 50,000 for the general public and Rp. 25,000 for students. In Indonesian terms where lunch at a local food-stall might cost around Rp. 15,000, these sums were seen as potentially too expensive. Despite the high admission fee, Art Jog 2015 welcomed approximately 80,000 attendees. While this number was down from 2014, Heri Pemad, Art Jog's founder told me that this decline was not cause for concern. In order to successfully execute this year's exhibition, comprised almost entirely of three-dimensional inter-media works, Pemad stated that the higher entrance fee was necessary and that in order to foster appreciation for art, one must also realize its costs. For me it was somewhat of a surprise to find out from many attendees with whom I spoke that this fee did not decrease their interest in attending Art Jog. Many even went so far as to liken the entrance fee to a movie ticket or the cost of a meal at one of Yogyakarta's malls – popular activities amongst Indonesia's expanding middle-class. While this may be interpreted as a potentially pessimistic observation suggesting their appreciation of art for its “entertainment

value” alone, many also described how Art Jog was exciting because it was different. Nowhere else in Indonesia are they able to see a display of contemporary art such as that which Art Jog puts on. Nowhere else do they feel as comfortable to engage directly with the works of art they are confronted with.

I am curious to find out during future trips to Indonesia how not only Art Jog but also Indonesia's biennials continue to develop and adapt in line with the demands of its growing “new public.” Further, I wonder how established artists, critics, and curators (those who I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation as skeptical of Art Jog's potential as a site for the production of discourse) will or will not acknowledge the credibility of new sites for the circulation of critical commentary concerning contemporary art.