

# “STRENGTH COMES FROM THE PEOPLE:” SUSTAINING ACTIVISM AND THE ARTS IN YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA

SHELLY CLAY-ROBISON

“Come hang out with us and you will see how we deal with all this anger and violence,” laughed an Indonesian artist engaged in environmental and human rights activism, when I asked him how he copes with the frustrations and hardships that can come with activism. The goal of this essay is to highlight the ways in which some socially-engaged Indonesian artists and activists care for themselves and their communities so that they have the physical, emotional, and mental energy to engage with social movements for the long haul. While this work focuses specifically on Indonesia, another hope for this piece is to spark ideas and discussions for activists and socially-engaged artists around the world and to ask readers: How might you incorporate your cultural traditions into your own activism?

## **The Context in Indonesia**

In the mid-1960s, Indonesia experienced a mass atrocity event that is unofficially referred to as the 1965 Mass Killings. An estimated 250,000-1 million people associated with communism, women’s rights organizations, ethnic Chinese, leftist artists, authors, playwrights, and activists were imprisoned and tortured without trial and many were killed by the Indonesian army and civilian death squads. In the three decades that followed, the Orde Baru (New Order regime) led by President Suharto, was authoritarian in nature and gave voice to the political and economic elite while working to hush dissenting thought, resistance, and activism. Yet during this oppressive regime, and beyond, artists and activists developed ways to continue their work supporting progressive social movements.

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My ethnographic work with artist and activist communities in Indonesia began in 2018 in the “arts capital,” Yogyakarta, locally referred to as Jogja. Initially, I worked with artists and community members who focused on the 1965 survivor movement. Even decades later, this community, along with their family members, still experience the stigma and threats that come from their political status. Activists and artists work with this community to uplift and help remember their stories, to support them financially and socially, and to prevent future violence through education. Because 1965 set the stage for three decades of authoritarian rule where the government prescribed a patriarchal and conservative way of living, I also seek out the activist and artistic work in the feminist and women’s rights movements and the environmental movement.

In this context, socially-engaged artists are exposed to stories about the trauma of torture, imprisonment, and death from the 1965 mass killings. They are also operating in a context that prioritizes economic development and corporate interests over human rights, and corruption. They conduct arts-based workshops in communities experiencing illness from environmental pollution. They engage with issues of gender inequity in the home and in society and gender-based violence. Sometimes they are the ones who are threatened with censorship or even direct violence for engaging with

these themes and issues. In spite of this, many socially-engaged artists I worked with are also deeply empathetic and feel the pain experienced by the individuals and communities they work with. It is no wonder that I heard expressions of cynicism, exhaustion, and frustration with the movements and causes themselves, the socio-political climate, but also with fellow activists and socially-engaged artists. How then, are they continuing their work in such a context?

### **Beyond Concepts of Burnout and Resilience**

Discussions around burnout and how to be resilient during difficult times are commonplace in many fields from corporate to activism to education. Burnout is considered a state of physical and emotional exhaustion that can leave a person or team feeling negative and incapable of moving forward with their work. Often, the answer presented to this is building resilience or adopting behaviors that promote physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual positive health. There is important work addressing exposure to trauma, burnout, and mental health in human rights advocacy. There is also recognition that the human rights advocacy space in general is in need of mental health systems, supportive communities of practice, and funding for these activities. In the references section,

there are several articles and books that readers may find useful.

It is also important to look to local communities and investigate how they are already doing this kind of restorative work through cultural traditions. Many of the artists and activists in Jogja have worked in social movements for decades and I wondered how they maintain their energy and dedication to issues that can feel insurmountable and in contexts that can be frightening and exhausting.

### **Engaging with the Pain of Socio-Political Issues**

Not all artists engaging with social issues see themselves as activists. In fact, some of them are adamant in telling me they are not activists. They express that the goal of their work is not to specifically influence political or social change. But their work has the potential to influence worldviews and encourage audiences to question previously held ideas about political positions, gender, and social inequity nonetheless, and so in this way, it may encourage social change.

The artist Entang Wiharso interacts with the socio-political conditions in Indonesia and while his work is not activist in nature, he does investigate humanity's ability to perceive multi-layered social conflicts. His paintings and sculptures are vivid, large, and complex. Over espresso one afternoon, he

described to me how people like his mother, who come from small or rural communities in Indonesia, where there is little access to art like his, may have trouble interpreting complex works like his. Late one evening, Entang's mother visited him in his studio. He often works late into the night, and she came up quietly behind him and asked, "Aren't you tired?" She was not asking about physical exhaustion and the late hour, she wanted to know if he was tired and sad from the subject matter and the issues he deals with in his work. Why would he choose to make the work he does when he could choose something less painful?

Entang likens his work to that of a religious person whose purpose is to talk about social issues. This is why he wanted to become an artist, he felt an obligation to his community. Instead of making him tired, it makes him happy because that is how he engages with difficult and complex social issues. But Entang's mother was always concerned for her son and she worried about his exposure to and engagement with difficult socio-political issues. She was perhaps worried about her son's mental health. And rightly so, constantly thinking about, worrying about, considering, and investigating issues like poverty, violence, discrimination, and inequality can take a toll on a person. This is something audiences around the world might ask of Entang and those like him as well. Why are you engaged with politics and

social issues all the time? Don't you want to be happy? Many activists and socially-engaged artists in Jogja do not see their work in terms of this happy-not happy binary, however. They see injustice in the world and they must engage with it through art and activism in order to process through the anger, frustration, or sadness.

### **Committing to the Movement by Committing to Yourself**

Syafiatudina, who goes by Dina, is a member of the research-action collective KUNCI. She is a writer, curator, and organizer who has worked as an activist in a variety of social movements. At the beginning of the Covid pandemic, she dedicated most of her time to organizing an emergency action network that supported communities experiencing food and resource insecurity. In situations like this, when she realizes that she is dedicating an abundance of time to one of her three professional identities, she knows she needs to pull back and give time and energy to the others so that she does not lose herself. And if she loses herself, it is harder to continue activist work. Dina explained further,

"I've worked in social movements for a long time and sometimes I just get so tired and I get angry. I get angry at rich people. I get angry at the government and sometimes I'm like, 'Should I give up? How do I do this? How do I keep going?' But I never stop. Although, some people might say, 'Dina isn't very active anymore' or 'We haven't seen her in a

meeting for a while.' But actually, it was because I took time to be involved in different spaces. I know my limitations. But I think strength also comes from the people that I meet and are connecting with in the community. The stories that they tell me, the stories that we exchange are important. The most sustained political space that I'm involved in is the social movement contexts where I can be open and vulnerable, but also where I can have the community to hold me accountable for our shared values. Sometimes it's not a big space, it's 3 or 4 people. It keeps me going."

Dina finds ways to honor the multiple aspects of her life and treats herself humanely so that she can continue working for justice in her community.

### **Connecting With Each Other's Humanity**

In a rural village in Sukoharjo, about 40 miles east of Yogyakarta, residents experience a variety of illnesses due to a rayon factory that pollutes their air and waterways. In July 2023, I was invited to join an environmental and solidarity festival there. I joined a group of artists and activists who work with this community to educate the public, to engage in protest and resistance against corporate power, to strengthen community bonds through live music, to share food and communal artmaking, and to socialize. I was told that I was the first foreigner to visit this village and I was nervous about the implications that my presence could cause. When I arrived, the sun was blazingly hot, I

was exhausted from traveling, and I knew my white skin color drew attention to myself and away from the festival. My Indonesian friends apologized for all the selfies people wanted to take with me, but after community members became somewhat used to my presence, the women there pulled me over to their spot on a mat under a large tent. We shared snacks and tea and they each took turns sitting next to me, holding my hand, and asking me questions about my family while I asked about theirs as well. One woman in particular sat with me and maternally patted my back, while she told me about her life and the experiences of her village. "Please don't forget me when you leave. Please remember me. Remember us." I was overcome with emotion and promised that I would not forget her or the stories she told me while we held hands.

I had not expected to connect with someone in such a way. It was a common, every day interaction, but it was also a deep connection for people who live worlds apart. Artist Fitri DK, who works tirelessly with communities like this around Indonesia, confirmed the power of these kinds of connections in activist work. Sometimes it's the children she is able to connect with first, their curiosity and openness create opportunities for play and interaction. They giggle as they help her create a woodblock printed t-shirt or paint a wayang kardus (cardboard puppet) to be used later in a protest or demonstration. The

children run home then to tell their mothers and fathers and eventually the adults slowly begin to engage. She has moments where community members experiencing social, environmental, or direct violence build trust, rapport, and connection with her. She told me that these moments recharge her batteries and help her stay committed to this work. It is not that the work is no longer hard or exhausting, but the sharing of experiences, of emotions, and deep connection between humans, no matter how fleeting, can be sustaining and can be drawn on in moments of despair or frustration. It is necessary then, in order to have these experiences, to be with a community. To stay, to listen, to engage, and to weather discomfort.

### ***Nongkrong*: Hanging Out With Purpose to Build Trust**

Indonesian culture often makes it easy to stay and engage through the concept of *nongkrong*. Artists Rangga Purbaya and Sirin Farid Stevy created "Faith in Speculations," a mapping project that documents the oral histories of 1965 survivors. These stories run counter to the government's official narrative and seek to resist political and social oppression experienced by survivors. I asked Rangga how he and Farid find people to contribute stories and he proudly and joyfully replied,

“By *nongkrong*, of course! In Indonesia we have this activity, *nongkrong*, it’s like hanging out with people for no reason, just hanging out for no purpose. You just be together and talk about life, jobs, and you’re just doing nothing. This is how we get trust with each other.” They go into neighboring cities or communities and stop in a small food stall on the street and then start talking with people. Sometimes to the owner or just people lingering after a snack. They will sit and make small talk for a while and then they start testing the waters about 1965. Many times, people have stories to share. “

Humor and having fun together are often elements in *nongkrong*. While these elements may seem commonplace, unimportant, or just people hanging out, they are quietly significant to the health and longevity of a movement. Participants actively build trust and connection with each other but also with the communities they work with as well. This is not to say that *nongkrong* as a concept is utopian in practice. Several female activists and arts-workers questioned who *nongkrong* was for in some spaces. Women do not always feel safe and sometimes experience harassment or sexual assault in some gatherings. Other times, they feel ignored or pushed to the periphery. In movements that tout equality and upholding human rights, it is especially important to consider group power dynamics and practicing these very values. Importantly, some women create their own spaces and opportunities for *nongkrong*

where they work to stop the replication of oppression and violence.

### ***Sumsuman: Celebrating Collective Activism***

During Summer 2023, I was invited to *nongkrong* with the artist collective, Taring Padi. It was a chance for the collective’s members to get together and socialize and to include members who live abroad but who come back to visit Jogja during the summer months. To an outside observer, the event looks like a typical social gathering with family-style Javanese food and tea to drink. We sat on the floor and shared plates of home cooked food, while children filtered in and out, people laughed and chatted with each other, and quiet sounds from the forest filtered in. I sat next to my friend and artist Fitri DK and commented to her that it was nice to see the collective’s members gathered together for *nongkrong*. She agreed that *nongkrong* is part of it, but clarified that the purpose of this gathering is also styled after the Javanese concept of *sumsuman* which is like an after party or a gathering of specific inner circle members after an event. This custom originated as a tradition after wedding ceremonies and celebrations to recognize the end of the work or event planning done by the neighborhood team of people who helped with the wedding. Traditionally, there is a special dessert porridge dish served called *bubur sumsum*, which is where the concept gets its name.

But in this case, Taring Padi used the concept of *sumsuman* to bring the artists and activists together to celebrate the activism projects they had been working on all year around the world. This very purposeful event was about tending to relationships and keeping the social ecosystem healthy and strong. We rejoiced in each other's company, but through this cultural event, we were also reminded that we belong to something beyond ourselves: to a collective, to a movement, to a cause, to each other. This reconnection and bond strengthening coupled with family, friends, food, and fun, helps to keep activists committed to each other and to a movement while refueling them through difficult times. In Indonesia, being an activist is not just an individual identity but also a collective one. It makes sense then that part of that identity includes collective restoration.

### Conclusion

I am incredibly lucky that conducting fieldwork in Indonesia also provides the opportunity for building friendships, which is my own source of restoration. One such friendship is with Vivi, director of Jakarta Feminist. Her dedication to the global and local feminist movements is inspiring, but it is not without hardship. She is regularly harassed and faces verbal violence both online and in person, so I asked her how she copes with it. "Dogs and cats are mental health helpers! But at the beginning when I

did this activism, I thought I had to be 'on' all the time. But then, I read bell hooks and Audre Lorde and they say that rest and self-care is resistance. So, I release my stress by cooking because there is pounding of the meat or stabbing a vegetable! And I pretend I'm pounding the patriarchy!" Humor is certainly a means of restoration, but Vivi was tending to the physical body is as well. Readers may be interested in the book *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* and its accompanying podcast *Feminist Survival Project*, by Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski, which are referenced below.

The socially engaged artists and activists I worked with in Jogja strive to commit to more than just social justice. They make an intentional commitment to themselves as individuals, to each other and the groups they work with, and to building community in an intentional way through their cultural traditions and celebrations.

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