Making it to Bandung

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It's the first night of Ramadan, and I'm sitting on the stoop of my new house, listening to the imams' recitations and breathing in the scent of the frangipani tree in the front yard. Occasionally a gunshot echoes around the neighbourhood; bird and bat shooting seems much more prevalent in Bandung than anywhere else I've lived in Indonesia.

It has been just over a month since our family of five began relocating from Canberra's cold winter to Bandung's mild summer. We have stopped in hotels and the spare rooms of loving and generous family and friends along the way, and now we are finally ensconced in our own place. The fridge was delivered this evening and we had our first home cooked meal. Tomorrow the kids start their 'trial' at the local school down the road, where we hope they will settle in and learn the language quickly. The early start may well be the biggest challenge for us all!

It is not the first time we've packed up our things and relocated temporarily; my husband and I spent several periods, stretching between a year and few months, in Yogyakarta before we had our kids, and then in 2010 we braved Yogya again with two two-year-olds and a five-year-old. For three months we lived in a small house with a traditional Javanese facade, called a *joglo*, and numerous fish ponds. It was not an unmitigated success — the kids didn't cope well with Yogya's ever increasing heat, and school did not work out so well. But professionally, my residency at the Indonesian Visual Arts Archive (IVAA), sponsored by Asialink, was an amazing experience. It gave me the opportunity to make new connections, learn new methods and ideas and inspired a whole new direction which has led me to where I am now. I spent those three months investigating the abundance of arts-based children's educational projects, mostly in Central Java and

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Bandung. My intentions had initially been to look at public programming for children in art galleries and institutions in Indonesia, but I quickly realised there was little of this, and when it occurred, it was usually outsourced to organisations that had other, more intriguing projects outside of the institutions.

I ventured south of Yogya to Sekolah mBrosot, where a collective of artists, architects, theatrical and literary folk were running a tiny library in a village with considerably lower than average levels of literacy and school attendance. Here I met a woman with three children under three, and in her worn out face I saw a reflection of my own experiences. It was the first time I had conversed with an Indonesian woman who was prepared to admit to the difficulty and strain of caring for these tiny people all day while her husband was out working. The eldest daughter was intrigued by the library, and they visited every day so she could flip through the books while her mother focussed attention on her sickly baby. This amenity, although not yet fully embraced by the community, provided a lifeline for at least one family, and I felt like it may well lead them to a better future.

North of Yogyakarta, in Muntilan on the slopes of Mt Merapi, I met Gunawan Julianto and his Tlatah Bocah (Children's World) team. They were in the process of engaging children with traditional performance arts and contemporary interpretations; they linked villages without performance groups to those with established professional troupes, encouraging children of diverse backgrounds to revive the local dances their grandparents had known. My family and I visited several remote villages, watching an amazing variety of performances, from tiny tots doing headstands in *jatilan* (a dance which features rattan horses, and in adult versions induces sometimes-violent trances) to performances which featured costumes strangely reminiscent of native American dress.

Bringing my kids to these events provided a useful icebreaker and made it easier to connect with parents and facilitators in the short time we had together. But it also reminded me of my own childhood, some of which was spent in remote West Timor and the Philippines. As I watched my son striding confidently down the road to the village, my daughters holding hands with Gunawan as they walked behind him,

I remembered family picnics to villages where no-one had ever seen white people before. People here too, brushed their hands curiously across the girls white blond locks and pinched their cheeks. 'They look just like little dolls!' became a constant refrain.

Towards the end of my residency, many of Tlatah Bocah's members found themselves in the path of Mt Merapi's largest eruption in many decades. Not only were they displaced from their homes into refugee camps all around Central Java, but they also suffered the loss of friends and relatives, and a spiritual leader and guardian of the volcano, Mbah Maridjan. While nominally Muslim or Catholic, these villagers held Mbah Maridjan in great esteem and, when he died in his home after refusing evacuation, it shook some people's faith in the volcano's inherent value as the centre of their lives. In the days after Mt Merapi's eruption I travelled back to Tlatah Bocah's small headquarters several times. It was overflowing with emergency supplies donated by supporters far and wide, and I brought more from my own neighbourhood in Yogya. The Tlatah Bocah team had taken on a quite different role on the night of the first eruption, immediately heading up to the highest villages to help in the evacuation. In the following days they distributed aid to the refugee camps, and continued to breach the safety zone to check on the welfare of those elderly and infirm who had refused evacuation.

After a few days of wearing masks to protect ourselves from the volcanic dust that fell after every eruption; sweeping, dusting and mopping it out of the house every day, we decided to continue with our earlier plan to spend a couple of weeks in Bandung. Shortly after we left Yogya, the largest eruption yet showered stones, dust and ash on most of Yogyakarta. By all accounts it was a terrifying night in which many of our friends had resigned themselves to their ends. We were glad to have been spared this trauma, especially for our children's sake, but strangely also sad not to have been there with our neighbours to support them. We were well aware that the psychological wounds left by the massive earthquake in 2006 were still near the surface, and fear was easily aroused. One day a few weeks earlier, an unusually strong wind had whipped up a dust storm and pulled off loose sheets of roofing while I was out of the neighbourhood. Suddenly the normally

teeming streets were absolutely empty, I was left peddling along a deserted road while motorbikes were left abandoned. I decided to head straight home to our kampung; I was greeted with joyous relief. 'We were so worried about you, we thought you'd never come back!'

Our time in Bandung was a relief too, and we determined that the weather here made for much more contented children. The research was a little rough going; my intended subject appeared to get cold feet and avoided me as much as possible. After a few days a mentor back home put me onto a new path and I met Dr Rikrik Kusmara — energetic, unfailingly helpful, endlessly knowledgeable. Within a few days he had introduced me to a number young (mostly) women who were running grassroots arts programs for children out of their front rooms, book shops, and art galleries. Herra Pahlasari, who has turned her family home into a gallery, art workshop and resource library on contemporary art, as well as maintaining her own art practice and caring for her young daughter and curator/academic husband, was an instant ally.

We returned to Yogya to find the threat of Mt Merapi had shifted to a slower, but equally deadly concern. 'Cold lava' or rivers flowing thick, fast and wide with volcanic debris were enveloping buildings upstream alongside the river our kampung also straddled. It seemed a more insidious threat; heavy rain anywhere could and did bring the river level up faster than imaginable. We decided to temporarily relocate. As the end of my residency approached, I spent much more time helping out Tlatah Bocah than anything else. But of course I was a less than useful assistant, with no Javanese, no motorbike riding skills and little local knowledge. I asked Gunawan if he could see some way I could be more helpful. 'Get in touch with people in Australia,' he said. 'See if you can find some children that might send letters or pictures to the kids here in Muntilan, so they know the rest of the world cares about them.' And so the Teman Gambar (Drawing Friend) project was born, in which eventually, over a thousand Australian and Indonesian school kids exchanged pictures and stories about their lives. I left Yogyakarta with a bundle of drawings to post off to the first participating schools when I arrived home.

Considering the natural disasters, the heat, and the number of mosquitoes in our house those three months, the fact that we all five survived and avoided dengue fever was quite a success in itself.

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Bandung is much cooler. Cipaku, our chosen neighbourhood, is cooler still. Mosquitoes are few and our house has insect screens. The days dawn bright and hot but a breeze keeps air circulating and by late afternoon the sky is more grey than blue.

Now I am on campus at the Institut Teknologi Bandung, where it is down time between academic years. I met Tisna Sanjaya, one of my proposed case studies, in my first week here. I first saw Tisna's work in the Third Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, at the end of my first year at university in 1999. His monumentally sized rattan figures stood on their heads, with banners painted like Indonesian film advertisements declaring 'Years of thinking with the knee', depicting former and then-current presidents Suharto and Habibie in positions of supplication. It was perhaps my first hint that my life experiences had furnished me with not just a second verbal language, but also an understanding of a certain aesthetic language specific to Indonesia, or at least contemporary Southeast Asia. I met Tisna for the first some five years later when I undertook an internship at Cemeti Art House, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia's first contemporary art space, when he had just undertaken an art project based on soccer. In the hustle of Cemeti's preparations for a publication celebrating 15 years, I had but a few moments to clarify my translation of his essay; I was another face in the crowd.

After our first conversation here, I can already see how Tisna's own analysis of his participatory art practices will contribute to my attempts to build a broader framework for relational or dialogical aesthetics. He explains how he views each art project as a long-term communicative tool, gathering support from a broader variety of stake holders, disseminating information through visual and performative means, and then re-presenting and representing these groups within the formal system. Unlike many artists, Tisna does not see his work as protest, instead he engages within the formal justice and legal system, sometimes spending years fighting legal battles in court as well as in the

street. Waiting to meet Tisna, I found myself amongst a group of men all part of his latest project, a long-standing effort to protect a local green wedge from development. A pro-bono lawyer, an art historian, and a painter among them, they were eagerly anticipating a meeting with the mayor later that week, where he was expected to sign away the developer's rights. Already I am imagining future difficulties in maintaining an objective, analytical perspective when those I am dealing with sometimes expect allegiance to their cause.

Rikrik Kusmara has again become a key contact in Bandung. A lecturer in the Institut Teknologi Bandung, he is now formally my supervisor. I contacted Rikrik when I was applying for an Australia Prime Minister's Australia Award, and his support and that of ITB was no small part of my successful application. I am grateful for all his assistance, cognisant of his busy schedule as a writer, curator, academic and family man. At our second meeting, while we are waiting for the enigmatic Tisna Sanjaya to appear, Rikrik proposes another potential subject, younger artist Fajar Abadi. Fajar's projects often involve food and marginalised communities, and as it turns out I realise I have already organised to attend one of his projects the following day.

Herra Pahlasari, with whom I have maintained a friendship over the years since my Asialink residency, is still organising exhibitions and accompanying public programs from the front room of her house at 14 Jalan Sosiologi. The space, called S.14, has in fact now expanded to take up her living room and side annexe, where she has initiated a specialist visual arts library. At the end of the week we will move from our hotel into this home/library/gallery/studio. But before then, on a quiet Wednesday morning, we arrive to attend Fajar's exhibition and participatory project, Mamakuaing. The kitchen is full of women in the midst of indeterminate cooking activities. Herra's mother and mother -in-law are here, as well as friends and Herra's nieces and daughter. Fajar is in amongst them disappearing up and down the stairs via his exhibition in the small front room, preparing for the arrival of a group of mothers and children from the community that sort through Bandung's rubbish, gleaning items for reuse or recycling. When they arrive they are initially friendly but reserved. Herra's exuberant introductions quickly put the women at ease, but the children remain

glued to their mother's sides. They make my kids and Layka, Herra's daughter, look positively wild by comparison.

The day's activities involve a tour of the exhibition, which includes two food-based works by other artists as well as Fajar's. Fajar's mother is his collaborator and competitor in this project, which involved a cook-off where attendees at the opening judged who had created the better soup. We giggled at a video work which depicted Fajar (who is by no means a small man) and his mother battling it out in the kitchen, complete with kitchen utensil weaponry and audio reminiscent of the old-school two-player martial arts computer games I played as a teenager. Of course, Mama took out the honours for the best soup, and now a pot of it sits bubbling away in the exhibition space as we descend to the workshop, otherwise known as the garage. Here, we will cook Fajar's special soup recipe with our children, under Fajar's instructions. The impetus behind this project is Fajar's memories of his mother's attempts to encourage his appetite as a child, as he was *susah makan*, or a difficult eater. Fajar draws a metaphor around the word '*rasa*', which simultaneously means taste, touch and emotion; in this word Fajar sees the embodiment of the mother child relationship.

Band-aids are quickly required as the sharp knives challenge mothers and children — my son included. I feel my tension levels rising, I have three children's unskilled chopping and peeling to manage, and we are far behind the other mother-child pairs. I'm having difficulty suppressing some of my less positive maternal emotions in the properly self-contained ('*jaga diri*') way; always one of the ongoing challenges I face when parenting in Indonesia.

As I watch Herra manage the influx of out-of-place strangers, family members and art project protocols, I feel both specific and general empathy. My PhD project also involves a component of practice-based research, and over the past 18 months I have often found myself struggling to manage my roles as mother/artist/facilitator/researcher all in the one moment. Looking at Herra's husband, Ucok, and mine, Shane, circling around with their cameras, thankfully taking on roles as documenters, I realise how many parallels our families have; no wonder we all get along so well.

We have been in Bandung barely a week when Yogyakarta calls us. There is opportunity for complete immersion in Indonesia's lively and completely self-sufficient art scene. Set for the first week of July are the Yogyakarta Arts Festival (FKY); ArtJog13, Yogyakarta's annual art fair; several important exhibition openings; the culmination of several ongoing projects. We put a deposit on a rental property in Bandung and arrange to move in the following week, then make (train) tracks to our Indonesian home town.

Our mornings are spent attending a school holiday program at the Perpustakaan Kota (Town Library), organised by some primary school art teachers I met during my IVAA residency. Here — in between stopping occasionally to photograph the kids making scarecrows and painting rice-field hats — we discuss the logistics of a collaborative art project I have already begun at Turner School in Canberra and Mulwaree High School in Goulburn. It will continue at Sekolah Tumbuh in Yogya, and possibly in Muntilan and Bandung too. I am awaiting the arrival of a shipment from home, which contains the collaborative work to date and related documents. Introductions are made; materials and mediums proposed, tentative dates are set. My colleagues seem confident that we should be able to organise an exhibition space at the Jogya National Museum, and I'm thrilled with the prospect of working in this space.

Once upon a time, when I first lived in Yogyakarta as a student, under the ACICIS scheme, we visited the erstwhile Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (Indonesian Academy of the Arts, or ASRI) building in Gampingan. At that time it was a squat occupied by the activist arts collective Taring Padi, with intermittent water and electricity, but continuous creativity and discussion. Not long after our visit, Taring Padi was attacked by a fundamentalist Islamic group whose violence was so intense it left one member permanently disabled. More recently, the building was declared the Jogya National Museum (JNM — and with this spelling); a museum building without a collection. This interesting inversion of the problems museums face in Australia is somewhat assuaged by the building's use as an art space for hire, and the venue for the Biennale Yogyakarta. It seems only fitting that I continue my relationship with the building in this way.

After their games and making activities at the library, my kids are exhausted and are back in bed at the hotel by midday. Leaving Shane to lounge by the pool I head out to the 'scene', visiting colleagues and friends. Yogyakarta artists are rarely active before noon, but they work late into the night. I am putting in long days, taking on the early morning school-kid crowd and the late night art events, but on Wednesday after lunch I opt for a nap and a haircut, and am talked into a massage and conditioning treatment as well. Two hours later I am relaxed and revived. That night we hit the Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta, where craft market-stalls and traditional performance arts take over Pasar Ngasem, otherwise known to tourists as the 'bird market'. We settle in to the amphitheatre seats to await a *jatilan* performance by a theatre group from Bantul on Yogyakarta's south side. Our kids join the gathering of small people waiting by the stage, and after a moment we are joined by Ronald Apriyan, one of our oldest friends in Yogyakarta. In fact, it is his two children that ours have joined, completely ignorant of the fact that they have all met and played together three years before. When the masked dancers descend from the stage, the children run away shrieking, and then advance, retreat, advance as they regain their courage. I love watching my kids fall into this ritual; one they learned watching Indonesian performances with friends in Canberra.

Saturday night is the night we've all been waiting for. The highly anticipated opening of ArtJog13. Thanks to a friend's VIP card, we were granted access to the preview the day before, while the massive façade of flattened oil drums was still under construction. But tonight, in spite of the teeming crowds, we have come to see the opening ceremony, which will include the switching on of the carousel of puppets that stand outside the building. Our good friends, Iwan and Ria from Papermoon Puppet Theatre, have been commissioned to create the signature piece for this year's fair, with the theme of maritime culture. It's a hugely prestigious role to land; I'm so excited for them as their careers hit new heights. I'm even feeling a little prestige by association, as Iwan and Ria make time to chat to us and cuddle the kids on their big night. The children are desperate to see the carousel; the visible mechanics of cog and wheel hint at animation; the

Papermoon puppet carousel in front of ArtJog13's monumental facade at Taman Budaya, Yogyakarta (photograph by Elly Kent)

big-headed puppets each have their tools of trade ready to work. We arrived early, hoping the carousel might be working already. But it is part of the ceremony, and will only move when the appropriate

protocols have been observed and the appropriately high ranking minister flicks the switch. The crowd of several thousand endures an hour of speeches with more or less good humour (slow-claps from the back notwithstanding) and at last the big wheels begin to turn.

I escort Shane and the kids back to the main road to catch a taxi, and return prepared to flash my VIP card way into the reserved lounge area. In the crowd out the front I find a colleague from the ANU School of Art and his partner. We chat about the logistics of motorbike rentals and other expatriate concerns while we watch the crowd siphon into the building. Perhaps no need to go in really? Eventually we make our goodbyes, and, forgetting that I have special privileges, I queue up to get in. It's crowded and hot, and the few familiar faces I see aren't looking very happy. Eventually I notice a discreet black curtain through which artists and others are entering and exiting. On the other side, I find all the people I haven't managed to catch up with in the last few days. Theresia Augustina Sitompul is there; her beautiful kinetic sculpture of a wire submarine ark rowing over a sea of silver seeds has won her a Young Artist's Award, which includes a residency in Germany. We chat about the difficulties and opportunities in managing overseas residencies and young children; There's daughter is just few months older than mine. I work up the courage to introduce myself to Enin Supriyanto, a writer and curator whose recent publication I translated through an intermediary. He tells me the book, *Sip! Contemporary Indonesian Art Today*, is gearing up for a second edition and may well lead to a second volume. Internally I congratulate myself on overcoming my usual nerves to network as well as socialise. I run into another friend who has recently moved home to Kalimantan from Sydney. Andreas is finding waking up to choking smoke every day a challenge and Yogyakarta's comparatively mild weather and pollution are a relief. We agree to meet next time he's in Bandung, where he has many relatives. In the meantime, I'm invited to visit him in Balikpapan, when the smoke clears a little.

Returning to Bandung by train the next day, we are all exhausted. We have five seats of which only two are together, so I spend about half of the time with one or two children sleeping on my lap. The past month has been a disrupted one for the kids, they've been

in other people's space for a long time now, and without routine or school, we're all beginning to get on each other's nerves. This quiet time watching the landscape go by and snoozing together feels like a blessing.

Tonight we will spend one more night at Herra and Ucok's house, and tomorrow, move into our new house. There's still a bit to do, to turn it into a home. And there's still a bit to do to turn this trip into productive field research. But just for now, I'm content to be sitting on the steps while the sun sets over the valley crowded with red-tiled rooves, and a cool mist settles in the green treetops.

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