

# What's with all the site-specific art? The Instrument Builders Project

<sup>1</sup> This idea comes from texts co-authored with Nicholas Croggon, such as our paper 'Founding a Discipline: Australian Art Criticism After *Art & Text*', presented at 'Impresario: Paul Taylor / POPISM / *Art & Text*', Monash University with Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 1 September, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The Instrument Builders Project, co-curated by Kristi Monfries and Joel Stern, Indonesian Contemporary Art Network, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 24 June–16 July, 2013. The participating artists were: Rod Cooper, Dylan Martorell, Pia van Gelder, Michael Candy, Wukir Suryadi, Asep Nata, Ardi Gunawan and Andreas Siagian.

<sup>3</sup> A karinding is a musical instrument traditionally made in West Java, Indonesia.

The theme of the landscape must be the most conservative template available for interpreting and writing about Australian art history: from Bernard Smith's important, though now thoroughly outmoded *Australian Painting: 1788–1960* of 1962, to the recent and extremely cringe-worthy BBC television series *The Art of Australia: Strangers in a Strange Land*, narrated by Edmond Capon, former and long-lasting director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Such histories of Australian art, the latter evidently indebted to the former, are bent on discerning the intrinsically 'Australian' qualities in artworks produced in Australia or by Australians. In other words, they seek to situate such artworks within a nationalist rhetoric, a rhetoric that appears decreasingly relevant to artists and theorists working under the sign of contemporaneity — characterised, as it is, by the flow of global capital, migration, instant communication, and so on.

The best contemporary art today seeks not to exemplify some regional quality, like 'Australian-ness', rather, it considers regionalism, place or location as jumping-off points: it locates national borders as something to transcend (and thereby enter the global discourse of contemporary art) rather than a perimeter by which to be curtailed.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say, however, that contemporary art ignores issues of regionalism or, for that matter, the seemingly undying allure of the landscape thematic. Many contemporary artists do indeed still work directly with urban and natural landscapes. The interest in the landscape as an artistic material, subject and framing device has, however, radically changed in the last thirty to forty years. The main paradigm through which it is explored today is, of course, site-specific art. Here I will explore one aspect of this intersection between site-specificity and contemporaneity by looking at the Instrument Builders Project, which took place in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in June–July 2013. This project, which brought together a small group of Australian and Indonesian artists to collaborate by building instruments together over the duration of three weeks, is not only exemplary of the unfolding global network of contemporary art, but the site-specific work it produced is also typical of this new, dominant mode of engagement with the landscape, one better fitted, I will argue, to the discourses of contemporary art.

The Instrument Builders Project (IBP) was a collaborative program between Australian and Indonesian sound artists and instrument builders, which extended to include artists who work with other, more conceptual (i.e., non-musical) forms of composition, such as Ardi Gunawan, and artists who make non-musical instruments, such as Michael Candy.<sup>2</sup> Curated by Kristi Monfries and Joel Stern, it brought together instrument builders with traditional skills, like Asep Nata, a Bandung-based ethnomusicologist and renowned karinding craftsman,<sup>3</sup> with advanced technological practitioners, like Pia van Gelder and Andreas Siagian. The project took place at the Indonesian Contemporary Art Network (iCan), which was utilised as both a studio and gallery, housing the workshop, performances, and eventually an exhibition of the

instruments built. While the IBP was developed under the banner of producing new, improvised musical instruments, building on the rich local scene in Yogyakarta of which contributing artist Wukir Suryardi and his outfit Senyawa are central figures, many of the instruments actually produced in the project ended up exploring wholly different notions of instrumentality, often largely separate from music and more conceptually or spatially oriented instead.

The IBP is, of course, just one example of recent Australian–Indonesian collaborations, the most well-documented probably being Punksila, which comprises the Australian artist Danius Kesminas (of Slave Pianos) and Indonesian Art Institute graduates ‘Hahan’ Uji Handoko Eko Saputro, Rudy ‘Atjeh’ Dharmawan, ‘Iyok’ Prayoga Satrio Utomo, Janu Satmoko, Prihatmoko ‘Moky’ Catur and Gde Krisna Widiathama. Both the IBP and Punksila reference regional, Indonesian concerns: the IBP draws on traditional South-East Asian cultural forms, like Nata’s karindings and the gamelan set-up, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the modern technological development of Indonesia which has, in many ways, developed side-by-side with the DIY media culture of piracy and hacking, enacted by artists like Siagian through his collective Lifepatch; likewise Punksila’s name directly refers to Pancasila, the nationalist philosophy of the Indonesian state. But the two projects situate such concerns *between* regions: literally, through the interstitial space of collaboration. While the collaborative works do not ignore regional traditions and concerns, indeed they actively draw on them, the works produced are typically not *about* those concerns as such, and translation instead becomes a key theme. Co-curator Monfries tellingly described a key aspect of the project as being the creation of a ‘diplomatic, basic structure for ongoing ... communication’.<sup>4</sup>

*MOS (Mountain Operated Synthesizer)*, produced for the IBP by Michael Candy, Pia van Gelder and Andreas Siagian, was outwardly more concerned with the Indonesian landscape (that is, more site-specific) than any other work produced during the IBP. It was installed directly on site at Base Camp 2 of Mount Merapi, the active volcano about forty kilometres from Yogyakarta’s city centre. Due to its regional location, one of Siagian’s roles as an Indonesian collaborator based in Yogyakarta with the Sydney-based van Gelder and Brisbane-based Candy pertained to such translation: to ‘make sure the instrument’s installation ... doesn’t infringe the local wisdom’, alongside providing technical support and building electronic circuits.<sup>5</sup>

*MOS* comprised three flags with sensor devices sewn into their fabric, which measured the mountain’s natural conditions: moisture levels, wind-speed and temperature. The sensors synthesised this natural information to produce sounds that were ‘operated’ by the changing meteorological conditions at the site; these sounds were broadcast through small speaker devices installed next to the flags, producing a slowly oscillating triadic drone. While the work was specific to the climate at Mount Merapi, it was not a work ‘about’ Mount Merapi’s climate; it was about making a specific

4 Kristi Monfries, quoted in Ili Tulloch, ‘Australian, Indonesian Artists Make Music of Mount Merapi,’ *Jakarta Globe*, 15 August, 2013, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/features/australian-indonesian-artists-make-music-of-mount-merapi/> (accessed 5 November, 2013). This suspension of regional specificity in the interstitial space of translation is also central to the work of Antariksa, the co-director of iCan as well as a member of the Yogyakarta-based Kunci Cultural Studies Center, who is frequently involved in the translation of key Indonesian texts (his own as well as those by others) into English and vice versa. In 2014, Kunci will collaborate with *Discipline* to provide a guest-edited section on concerns in contemporary Indonesian art, thereby producing a parallax view onto the contemporary by stitching together perspectives from both Melbourne and Yogyakarta. See: <http://kunci.or.id/> (accessed 5 November, 2013).

5 Andreas Siagian, quoted in Ili Tulloch, ‘Australian, Indonesian Artists Make Music of Mount Merapi,’ *Jakarta Globe*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/features/australian-indonesian-artists-make-music-of-mount-merapi/> (accessed 5 November, 2013).

6 Boris Groys, ‘Politics of Installation,’ *e-flux journal* 2 (January 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/> (accessed 5 November, 2013).

7 See also the work of Allan Lamb, an Australian sound artist who amplifies telephone wires over long expanses of desert by measuring the wind that excites them.

8 Joel Stern, quoted in Ili Tulloch, ‘Australian, Indonesian Artists Make Music of Mount Merapi,’ *Jakarta Globe*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/features/australian-indonesian-artists-make-music-of-mount-merapi/> (accessed 5 November, 2013).

here-and-now connection with that site before the artists had to leave again in a few weeks’ time, what Boris Groys might describe as the momentary privatisation of public space through the act of installation.<sup>6</sup> That is, *MOS* could be restaged on any other mountain, or in any natural environment for that matter, probably to an interesting, comparative effect—indeed a version of it was shown in the gallery at iCan along with spray bottles to mimic condensation on the mountain.



Ardi Gunawan’s installation *Long wire instrument adapted from Wukir’s drawing* functioned similarly: it physically and sonically mapped the internal architecture of iCan, and in that sense was specific to it, however it was a work that could be restaged in any number of different architectural spaces. (In fact, the work was re-staged as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Jakarta International Video Festival, ‘OK Video’, at Gallery Nasional Jakarta in September 2013.) It comprised five long wires emanating from a central spot in iCan’s main gallery, and which extended to multiple points around the room. Viewers could play the work by pulling their fingers along the lengths of the wires, each wire producing a different tone based on its length (its end-point’s distance from the centre). Like previous instructional artworks by Gunawan that are based on the format of a composition—i.e., a plan for an action to be carried out sometime in the future, like a musical score and its subsequent and idiosyncratic performance—*Long wire instrument* could be reconstructed in different contexts to produce different sonic and conceptual results. Australian sound artist Jon Rose, for instance, adapts the long string instrument (LSI) genre by bowing politically pregnant fences like the Rabbit-Proof Fence in Western Australia, the Dingo-Proof Fence that traverses South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, or a separation fence in Palestine—these performances forming part of his practice of ‘playing’ or sonifying barriers, using ready-made LSIs.<sup>7</sup>

Both Gunawan's *Long wire instrument* and *MOS* bore a direct relationship to their immediate context, iCan in the former, and Mount Merapi in the latter, yet both instruments could be easily reproduced in other environments. This versatility points back again to the works' instrumentality—their capacity to measure or gauge certain empirical qualities, like the cubic space of a room, or the weather on top of a mountain. And it was this conceptual reconfiguration of what an instrument is or can be that was the most interesting outcome of the IBP, particularly in terms of what the project can offer to the discourses of contemporary art. Of the project, co-curator Stern has said: 'Instrument building as a practice sort of overlaps with music and especially experimental music, but also with sculpture and other sorts of visual art, including installation. We're really using instrument building as a central idea to explore these artworks that are hard to classify.'<sup>8</sup> The instruments built during the IBP that overlap with the medium of installation (synonymous with 'site-specificity'), like *MOS*, *Long wire instrument* and Dylan Martorell's *Drum Plough* (which I will discuss in a moment), reconfigure the trope of the instrument as an elegant metaphor for contemporary art's relationship to site. It thinks of that site-specific gesture as an investigation into a place, any place, as a starting point to explore *the situation of being placed*, rather than as an always already determined—i.e., innate—expression or thematic inflection. This interpretation chimes with the dominant contemporary narratives of globalism and mobility, what Nicolas Bourriaud calls the 'nomadic' figure of the contemporary artist, constantly moving from place to place (from residency to biennale and so on) and looking for ways to connect with those places.<sup>9</sup>

The prevalence of site-specific art today, which Hal Foster has derided as oftentimes being produced mindlessly and 'for the sake of it', is surely symptomatic of this changing relationship to place, though it is not necessarily uncritical.<sup>10</sup> Today, contemporary artists make site-specific work wherever they go, regardless of their previous relationship to that space. Their interest is not in endlessly exploring the history and specificity of a region like Melbourne, Australia (take for example Melbourne-based artist Nick Mangan who has in the last few years developed extensive research-based works on Nauru, Jack's Hills in Western Australia, and Papua New Guinea alternately, these disparate locations linked by the theme of the human extraction of natural resources). Rather, their interest is in establishing brief, even provisional relationships to that region or site for the duration of their exhibition or residency, which they perform as an expression of being placed or of having a base. This is all to say that under the sign of the contemporary, site or region becomes a jumping-off point that moves in a centrifugal motion outwards, rather than an interpretative framing device that moves centripetally, suffocating and blinkered as it tightens its grip around the artwork's neck.

It was Dylan Martorell's work produced for the IBP that perhaps best demonstrates this approach. Typically, Martorell's

9 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

10 See Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

11 After the installation is de-installed, it neither exists physically nor can it be adequately reproduced through photographic or filmic documentation (a photograph would necessarily crop the multidimensional vision of the viewer and exclude other sensory experiences; and a video would dictate the speed and path through which the viewer traverses the work, removing the quality of agency that is traditionally ascribed to viewers of installation art). For further discussion of the documentation of installation art, see Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

work is concerned with the temporary, comprising provisional structures that are not intended to last long after the duration of the show, and which are dismantled after exhibition and packed away for future use, before the artists starts the whole process anew again somewhere else. This approach, which favours using whatever materials are close to hand at the time, and, as many media releases for Martorell have exclaimed over the years, stems from his background as an improvisational electroacoustic musician with a long-standing interest in DIY culture. In this respect, it is significant that installation is Martorell's preferred working mode, because installation demands a priori that the viewer be physically present to experience the work, that they too be based here-and-now, even if only for a moment, because in their experience of the work they must not only use their eyes, but also their ears, nose, and sense of touch.<sup>11</sup>

Martorell's IBP work *Drum Plough*, made in collaboration with Wukir Suryadi and Asep Nata, began with the artist scouring the Yogyakarta streets, markets and electronic shops and bringing back to iCan a panoply of junk: a huge old wooden plough, bamboo shoots, various potted plants, cow bells, beer cans, broken terracotta pots, rocks, coconuts, an oil can, broken tiles, solenoid valves and drumsticks and more. Martorell then developed home-made robotic devices that triggered different parts of the installation to strike other parts in rhythmic beats controlled by a sampler. Clusters of tangled copper wire strewn with leaves from nearby trees were rigged-up on the ceiling, suspended alongside Nata's hanging pipe-flutes. Viewers could complete the electronic circuit of the copper clusters by touching the wire and grounding the signal with their bodies, thus producing a new electronic sound in the space. Through installing these instruments, Martorell produces a fleeting portrait of that landscape by reframing its objects—natural, new and refused—as an interactive, temporary artwork. In such instrument-installations, Martorell excises regional signifiers from nationalist epistemologies and reinstalls them on a more contingent plane, one that acknowledges just how mutable and evasive the concept of a regional or nationalist identity—under the sign of the contemporary, striated as it is with the themes of globalised capital, communication and migration—really is.