

Rekindling the spirit of resistance in Ludruk folk art

Riksa Afiaty in Conversation with Moelyono

Abstract

Indonesian artist-activist Moelyono and arts worker Riksa Afiaty engage in a deep conversation focusing on the East Javanese folk performance called *ludruk*. Ludruk is a medium of art that voices the resistance and struggles of the lower classes through humour, improvisation and popular narratives. This Javanese traditional cultural expression has survived through the dark history of Indonesian genocide followed by decades under an oppressive military regime. Ludruk has been historically elevating gender pluralism and galvanising community participation in attaining self-sustainability, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this dialogue, Afiaty and Moelyono reflect on how art is intertwined with social movements, self-organising, independence, and sustainability, and how art workers' are increasingly challenged in traversing their roles as facilitator, agitator, innovator, motivator, curator, and networker.

Keywords

ludruk, Moelyono, art, activism, community

As an arts worker engaged in the decolonisation of curatorial practice, I am taking this opportunity to have a conversation with the Indonesian artist-activist Moelyono. As an artist and community mentor, Moelyono moves between these roles interchangeably. Moelyono's creative and political practice is focused on principles of egalitarianism and partiality. He navigates the space between art, community engagement and activism by blending cultural experience with artistic tools, to support dialogue and political actions. With his artistic expressions, he continuously connects theory and praxis through community empowerment.

Born in 1957 in East Java, Moelyono studied painting at the Yogyakarta Art Institute (ISI) in the Faculty of Design and Fine Arts. Known for his long-term engagement with communities in remote areas, he has travelled extensively with his practice—from the north west of Banda Aceh, to Poso, to the eastern end of Alor and West Papua. Moelyono's long trajectory of supporting and mobilising different communities through critical action is a response to the structures of oppression and marginalisation created and maintained through the 'New Order' military regime led by Suharto. The term '*penyadaran*'—which carries similar meaning to Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of 'conscientization'—underpins his practice as a community-engaged artist.

His radical, site-specific and community-engaged exhibition practice is of great historical importance to the Indonesian art scene. In 1994, his exhibition titled *Reflections of the Environment* was staged to draw attention to the rapid development of Wonorejo in central Java. With the help of his activist friends, they collectively built an installation of a water tunnel made of wooden planks, based on the construction of a controversial dam in Wonorejo. The installation was built with the ruins from resident's houses who had since been displaced, and traditional art objects provided by the local community (see Figure 1). At the exhibition, Moelyono invited the audience to reflect on the consequences of forced displacement in the name of development. The exhibition encouraged the local community to develop empathy for people who are displaced in development processes and drew attention to the consequences of inadequate compensation, the loss of community due to displacement, and the connection to land and culture through place.¹



Figure 1: Jaranan Butho hanging on the wall at the Reflections of the Environment exhibition in Central Java in 1994. Photograph courtesy of Hyphen—& Moelyono.

10 years later, in 2004, his exhibition “*Lintang Desa*” at Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, continued his interest in participatory art and the preservation of community cultural knowledge. In preparation for the exhibition he and the residents of Kebonsari village conducted participatory research by recording local knowledge and history that reflected the social, political and cultural changes in Indonesia at the time. Included in the exhibition were folk songs, musical instruments, farm tools and equipment, native plants and foods. The artist and the community built a tent with a long table and chairs, so audiences could enjoy and share meals. The exhibition was celebrated with traditional art and performance from the community—including a *Ketoprak*² and *Gejog Lesung* performance.³

Moelyono channels his political stance as an artist by engaging with communities located around and outside of his studio in Winong Village, Tulungagung, East Java. His most recent engagement is with the community of *Ludruk Budhi Wijaya* in Jombang. As we explore in the following conversation, *ludruk* is a medium of art that voices the resistance and struggles of the lower classes. Moelyono also emphasises that this art form plays a key role in promoting social acceptance for transpuan performers. Transpuan is an Indonesian portmanteau term combining the first syllable of the Indonesian word ‘transgender’ (trans-) and the last syllable (-puan) of one word for ‘woman’ (*perempuan*). *Ludruk* has been providing the space for the transpuan performers to enact gender non-conforming roles both on and off stage without any restraints. They are also treated as equals in this social environment. Although the actors perform humour on stage, they also lead lives filled with laughter. In collaboration with the Budhi Wijaya troupe, Moelyono has been organising the *Festival Ludruk Desa* since 2018. However, it was postponed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, they have been attempting to shift the medium to a YouTube channel.⁴

This dialogic interview was conducted in person in 2022, and translated from Indonesian by Phycita Julie.

Riksa Afiaty (R): *You have an extensive background in art and have assumed several 'roles' such as activist, drawing teacher, companion, and facilitator. What was your first encounter with ludruk and what caught your interest?*

Moelyono (M): My knowledge of *ludruk* began with Cak Durasim, a famous *ludruk* performer in Surabaya during the Japanese colonial period (1942-1945). He once sang a famous satire verse *Pagupon omabe doru, Melu Nippon tambah sengsoro*, which roughly translates to ‘A pigeon nests in a *pagupon*⁵, the Nippon [Japanese] brings further desolation.’ Not long after, Cak Durasim was captured and died in the hands of the Japanese.⁶

In the 1980s, I was asked by *Bentara Budaya Yogyakarta* to write about Cak Markeso, a *ludruk* performer from Surabaya who was known for his “*Ludruk Garingan*”, in which he performed solo, like a stand-up comedian, playing a song and humming along. He went door to door, which was quite effective in voicing the People’s concerns as it did not cost a lot of money. As he didn’t need a venue, he was able to act and entertain people on his own, and in his own time. Blogger Erwien Kusuma (2017) writes about Cak Markeso’s humble mannerism:

He [Cak Markeso] told stories of what he and most people are dealing with on an everyday basis. Markeso made jokes about neighborhood shenanigans, spouses bickering over infidelity, premarital pregnancy, and economic difficulties due to debts. All the jokes and songs (*parikan*) in *ludruk* are

delivered in simple *Suroboyoan* (*ngoko*) dialect, which was delivered in candid and straightforward ways.⁷

Ludruk is a form of critical performance used in the fight against powerful elites. For many years marginalised people have participated in, and used ludruk performances to share their experiences of oppression. The potential of ludruk was also recognised by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)⁸ and used to promote its politics and ideology. Several ludruk groups under The Institute for People's Culture (LEKRA)⁹ held performances that angered authorities due to their criticisms of the ruling classes, including landlords and religious groups. In the aftermath of the September 30th Movement (commonly referred to as G30S)¹⁰ ludruk was banned by the military regime of New Order as it was perceived as a tool to criticise the state. There were crackdowns on the performances and several ludruk performers were imprisoned on accusations of being communists. After some time ludruk was revived under the 'guidance' of military institutions.¹¹ The songs were imbued with New Order-style development propaganda that preached government policies such as the Family Planning program and other moral messages that amplified the New Order's nationalist framework.

R: *I am interested in understanding how you develop your artworks in relation to ludruk. In your exhibition "Amok Tanah Jawa", you invited a ludruk group to perform as part of the artwork. Can you talk to me about your relationship with this group, and how this interaction came about?*

M: At that time I had the idea to invite ludruk performers to re-enact Hendra Gunawan's painting "*Pengantin Revolusi*".¹² I asked my friend, Tombro, a theatre performer in Malang, if he knew any ludruk performers and he recommended a group of students in Malang. Since we needed costumes, Tombro took me to Pak Totok and Mama Samsu's place—a couple of artists who are senior figures and role models among ludruk performers in Malang.

Mama Samsu is a transpuan who owns a beauty salon and tailoring business. She is also a skillful sewer of *cheongsam* (Chinese traditional dress) and other costumes. She advocates for other transpuan to refrain from engaging in sex work, and instead encourages them to learn and acquire other skills. Her other neighbours also followed this advice. The presence of Pak Totok and Mama Samsu, who like to help others, is welcomed in the village. In everyday life, Mama Samsu's gender identity is also accepted by the community.

Pak Totok writes scripts for ludruk performances. We had a discussion on ludruk and how much it is imbued with stories of resistance, and characters like Sakerah whose figure was immortalised on ludruk stages. Sakerah worked as a foreman at a sugarcane plantation in Bangil, East Java. Long story short, the Dutch wanted to control the sugarcane farmers' lands by forcing people to give up their land. Sakerah resisted and was thrown into prison, but it is said, because of his supernatural powers, that he managed to escape and could not be found.

The enemy knew that the only way to catch Sakerah was by holding an occasion involving a *Tandak* or *Tayub* dance performance featuring the dancer Samirah, who was a dancer he liked. His love for Samirah brought disaster on him. When Sakerah appeared in public, he was overpowered by the Dutch and captured.

At the time of this discussion about *Sakerah*, my friend Yusuf Muntaha was finishing a comic about Sakerah's capture. We exchanged ideas about how to design a work that responded to the character. On Pak Totok's suggestion, we finally re-enacted the scene and recorded this as a video in collaboration with Mama Samsu and Pak Totok, titled *Tandak Samira*.¹³

Another work that I am planning to animate is S. Sudjojono's painting *Di Balik Kelambu Terbuka*. In my conversation with Mama Samsu, I asked her to play the female figure in the painting who is a sex worker. The painting is now in the collection of a professor from Flinders University in South Australia.¹⁴

In 2016, I asked a Ketoprak group to recreate Raden Saleh's painting, *Penangkapan Diponegoro*. Ketoprak is considered a less popular performing art than ludruk, because it mostly tells stories of Javanese nobility, fairy tales and legends. It is also considered to be sacred since it is only performed for the sultanate palace.

I am interested in ludruk because it is a folk art. But also because it has a particular charisma where one can both express their dignity as well as the issues that concern them and show the role of transgender people in society in a positive light.¹⁵

My friendship with Pak Totok and Mama Samsu led me to get acquainted with other ludruk groups. In one work I wanted to recreate a painting of a scene of popular resistance by doing a photoshoot with a ludruk group. Pak Totok introduced me to a ludruk group in Malang city led by Pak Marsam. When I calculated the cost of production, it turned out to be expensive, since I had to pay for the rent of the set along with the sound system, stage lighting, and the performers. The cost was equal to a whole ludruk performance.

Pak Totok suggested that I travel to Jombang for a more affordable option. I also connected with groups in southern Malang. During this process I ended up meeting two transgender performers, and, after having conversations with them, I took their photos and painted *Primadona Ludruk* (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: "Primadona Ludruk", 2022 (in progress), Moelyono, oil paint on canvas, 120x200 cm. Photograph courtesy of Moelyono.

On my search for a ludruk group in Jombang, I remembered Mas Syifa—an early childhood educator in Kediri who I had taught to be an Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) facilitator. Mas Syifa was from Pare, a town close to Jombang which is known as the place of ludruk's origin. Mas Syifa, coming from *Nabdlatul 'Ulama* (NU) background, contacted his friends at Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia or Lesbumi (Indonesian Muslim Cultural Artists Institute) who had data on active ludruk groups. They suggested that I come to Jombang to meet *Budhi Wijaya*, a ludruk group led by Mas Didik Purwanto.

I had been coming to Ketapang Kuning Village since 2017 to visit Ludruk Budhi Wijaya. As a painter who paints about problems faced by common people, I really wanted to work with these groups. Like them, I am also interested in describing proletariat life through art. I approached Mas Didik and requested them to enact a scene from a ludruk story, which I intended to paint. That was the starting point of my relationship with the ludruk community. During this time we hung out and joked around. That made it easier for us to get to know each other and meant that the photoshoot—which took place in an elementary school hall—was performed with great enthusiasm.

At the time, I was also struck to learn that the Budhi Wijaya group had an educational vision and as such worked with the local school to conduct extracurricular training. They wanted children to be introduced to the art of ludruk from an early age. As the children grew to be skilled enough, they were often invited to open dance performances.

R: Since 2018, you and the Budhi Wijaya troupe have organised the 'Festival Ludruk Desa'. How did it come into being?

M: Before my exhibition *Amok Tanah Jawa*, I said to Mas Didik that I wanted to invite the ludruk group to perform for the opening, so that I could introduce them to the Director General of Culture, who would be officiating the exhibition.

Even though I did not have a big budget, it was great that Mas Didik was willing to work with me. At the opening, I had the opportunity to introduce Mas Didik to the current Director General of Culture, Hilmar Farid. After listening to Mas Didik's story, Hilmar asked me to organise the festival, after which I helped Mas Didik write the proposal, along with the budget. Even though I did not have a large budget, I was able to introduce Budhi Wijaya to the Director General of Culture, which resulted in the Ministry of Education and Culture funding the festival. That was the beginning of the collaboration for *Festival Ludruk Desa* that launched in 2018 and ran again in 2019. Of course, we had a hiatus during the pandemic. Hopefully, we will be able to bring the festival back in 2023.

R: When I attended the Festival, I saw a small group of transpuan, dolled up and kneeling at Sendang Made—a spring that has now turned into a cultural site—to wash their faces before going on stage. How do you see the dynamics of ludruk and transpuan within the community and ecosystem of Ketapang Kuning Village?

M: Sendang Made is a place of ritual for folks 'graduating' to become artists. This place is particularly significant for transpuan because it is said that Sendang was the hiding place of the king of Singosari when he was on the run. The king and his entourage disguised themselves as buskers, and the men

disguised themselves as women so as not to get caught. Thus the transgender ludruk performers follow a bathing ritual by washing their faces to legitimate their role as artists.

I am really interested in the way ludruk has cultural roots and ties to ritual landscapes. I started talking to the artists, asking where they live, and what their daily life was like. One of the women, Mbak Erma, said that she first performed ludruk with Mas Didik's father. Mbak Erma is financially independent and respected in the community. She explained that she was once a prima donna liked by many people. She earned her income from her salon, offering makeup services, and renting clothes. Although her business was a success, she desired to go on the Hajj pilgrimage.

This raised an awareness in the village community that as a transpuan and a Muslim they must remain confident to perform their faith through Hajj. Interestingly, Haji Erma—a name the villagers called her—told me that she went on Hajj as a man.

R: *One thing that I felt strongly in Ketapang Kuning Village was the communities acceptance of transpuan. I remember when the ludruk performers were getting dressed backstage, I saw a man waiting for one of the transpuan. I remember asking you back then whether they were spouses.*

M: Yes, they were sort of husband and wife. The wife's daily routine is to search for and gather grass. So it is a normal life in the village. To consider your question about the acceptance of trans women, well, yes, in the village there isn't any protest coming from the community.¹⁶

Besides being accepted socially, they are also accepted institutionally. If there are couples who want to marry, they go to Pak Modin (a government official in charge of marital affairs) and are married ceremonially with no legal documents. Pak Modin will officiate the marriage by saying, "I now pronounce you husband and husband."

It is important to understand how ludruk accommodates the existence of transpuan.¹⁷ Transpuan are proud of their self-actualisation through ludruk. I have had many conversations with both transpuan performers and Mas Didik about how ludruk becomes a beacon of acceptance of transpuan within the folk arts genre. They 'exist' in an ecosystem that contains and provides for them. In simple words, ludruk helps the transpuan performers in 'solving' everyday challenges through humour and gags. The stage does not provide resolute or straight stories but embraces humour as a strategy to 'free' people from their everyday burdens.

I think the people performing ludruk have made it a necessity in their lives. For instance, Mbak Erma owns a salon, but she actualises herself as a transgender person through ludruk. In this way, ludruk is a part of their lives, which is different to that of a paid performer who may treat performing like an occupation. These people do not depend on ludruk for their livelihood—they usually have other occupations such as farming, or owning a salon. They live their lives as common people.

R: *From these observations, it seems that the 'role'—in this case the social role of the performers outside of ludruk—is also celebrated. Ludruk is not only a form of entertainment, but it is a form of art in tune with its surroundings and created by paying attention to the needs of the community.*

M: Performers in Budhi Wijaya are able to survive and sustain their performances because they work outside of ludruk. The director is a chicken trader, some are security guards, construction workers, or farmers. Their lives do not depend economically on ludruk. Ludruk becomes a *chatarisis* outlet to

socialise and release them from the burdens of life. They commit to ludruk out of enjoyment, not money.

That's why when a person wants to book Ludruk Budi Wijaya, they are happy to correspond to the patron's budget—they think of it as an act of service rather than a livelihood. To manage this, they are quite strategic in having a coordinator who is able to find freelance performers in other villages to reduce the costs.

When I was working with them, I didn't have to continuously engage in discussion. My presence was more to motivate physically or mentally, encouraging them to continue creating their art or networking. And when I visit, they welcome me like a family member.

As a motivator, I have to be able to see how we can seize opportunities and possibilities. When I introduced the Director General of Culture to Mas Didik, I lent my support in the mediation and negotiations. Maybe that's where my capacity lies in running *Festival Ludruk Desa*.

Through the festival, the community is getting closer and building consensus as well as effectively organising and utilising resources. The head of the village, women in the *Pemberdayaan dan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK)¹⁸, and other members of the village were enthusiastically involved. They collectively managed internal resources by providing their yard for the stage, space in their homes for the backstage, and by cooking for the community. For external affairs, they received and managed additional funds from the government, which ultimately connected them with policymakers in their local area.

On the night of the main event of the ludruk performance, everyone filled the stage area. Along the street heading up to the stage, people came from various villages to sell stuff, including food, kitchen utensils, children's toys, etc. The atmosphere of togetherness filled the air, and was felt by the entire district (consisting of three adjacent villages).

The support for the event came from diverse parties, including diverse audiences as well as policymakers from the region, the sub-district head, the three village heads, cultural experts and even members of the parliament. My role there was to ignite enthusiasm and come up with suggestions here and there, since I was sure that Mas Didik and friends were already capable of managing the operations. Moral and comprehensive infrastructure support, in the end, turned the *Festival Ludruk Desa* into a cultural ecosystem.

In terms of organisation and management, I wasn't really actively involved, my job was only to help compose and send the proposal to the Director General of Culture. They have grown proficient in composing budget accountability reports since.

R: *I saw how Pak Moel negotiated and supported his friends when organising Ludruk Desa, perhaps these things could be seen as care work where it is possible to share your worries through conversations, or by listening to everyday mundane stories, or sharing artistic methods. Besides that, you also encourage sustainability—a role that enables the group to continue organising the Festival. Various efforts are carried out equally and are not top-down, such as helping to identify personal and group strengths, and strategically mapping out their needs, so that they can become independent subjects.*

M: In my opinion, education does not have to take form in verbal training or teaching. There are many ways to experience education. In my relation to the ludruk groups, I chose to be a motivator. The point of this role was to take an egalitarian position. I learned a lot about ludruk, and the performers, and in doing so I also learned how to arrange strategies in exploring the potential and

strength of ludruk. The method was to motivate, stimulate, inspire and encourage each other. I did not position myself as the subject who patronises the ludruk group as objects. Projecting the members of the ludruk group as subjects ensures their sustainability and independence. Mas Didik told me that he's now close friends with the Deputy Regent of Jombang, who turned out to be a fellow activist from the 1980s. The project of handing over networks, and establishing independence, and sustainability has been prioritised from the start.

For them it is enough that personal and communal communications are maintained, by comforting each other and sharing humour. The intimacy which is built through ludruk's humour made it easier for me to get along with the performers. Teaching methods differ from one context to another. 'Motivating' here means sharing our spirit with each other.

When the pandemic hit, it was quite chaotic: the salon had no customers, and there were few offers to perform ludruk. But then, Mas Didik had the idea to perform on YouTube. Even though it didn't bring in any money, things like that rekindled their enthusiasm. They also created a podcast of interviews with the ludruk performers.

In the last few months the group has received invitations to perform again.¹⁹ Last week, I received an invitation to their performance in Jakarta. It was held by the people originating in Jombang who missed the performances. The passion to live and enliven ludruk is what they care for, a place where they survive and carve out solidarity. Efforts to motivate and inspire the community are central to my approach. How to build self-confidence, so that they have faith in their own ideas. At the 2019 *Festival Ludruk Desa*, the community was able to implement their idea of having a ritual and parade prior to the performance.

R: *Can you share your personal reflection on the dynamics that encouraged you to assist the performers, and how it relates to your work in art education? What does your role as a companion artist entail?*



Figure 3: Screenshot of Moelyono working as a Companion Artist. Photograph courtesy Ludruk Budhi Wijaya and Moelyono, 2019.

M: First, it depends on the context: social, spiritual, or ritual. These factors determine the method. Another key idea is ‘handing over’, which must be based on human relations. I learned from NGOs how important person-to-person relationships are. For example, in my work in Early Childhood Care and Development or ECCD, I created an organisation consisting of individuals who, over time, became the more active agents and led the process of handing over responsibilities and power.

In my work with ludruk, I went along with the process that took place in the community. I didn’t arrive at their place and force my own thoughts and frameworks on their work or bring a format or methodology. After all, I am not a ludruk performer. I think my presence could be useful for the community if I could help connect them with other parties they hadn’t had the chance to build relations with, who could provide financial assistance, networks, or new knowledge. I believe building trust and relationships among human beings helps ludruk performers find the power to exist.

The method I used with the ludruk group naturally differed from my ECCD work, since they are an art group who have an existing organisation and have a different method of organising. In my work with ECCD, I came to the village with the aim to build a curriculum, conduct Training of Trainers (ToT), and establish a preschool upon the completion of the program. So my role was focused on shaping people’s roles and forming management processes. With ludruk, the organisation and infrastructure had already been established.

All they needed to do was to put meaning to their own ludruk performances—what is it for? Why are there so many roles for transpuan? Why is it important to create a sustainable ludruk festival? Such questions were put forward and used for collective reflection.

From the NGO’s point of view, measuring sustainability is fundamental, so that’s what I always hold on to. How to be sustainable? The starting point lies in organising the village community, involving everyone, including the village government in implementing and preparing educational modules, teaching aids, and mediums for learning.

Community organising is also directly related to the context of each locality. This is important as a reference for planning the ‘phase in’ and ‘phase out’ stages. ‘Phase in’ is mapping the potential of the local culture and community dynamics, training processes, classifying entities and apparatuses in the village. As the sense of empowerment continues to grow stronger, we proceed to the ‘phase out’ stage. ‘Phase out’ is the handover of what has already been done. The ‘who will manage’ bit is a very strategic component of the empowerment process of the community, so that they can develop independently.

Sustainability is what I consider the most when building relations with ludruk groups—how to walk alongside them without being patronising – because, again, I’m not a ludruk performer. I have seen irrelevant programs held for ludruk performers. For instance, in one training program for ludruk performers, they became confused about the script, since they were used to performing in freestyle or improvisational methods. There is no ‘real’ script. Upon knowing the plot, they would just improvise on stage. It’s different to modern theater where the performers are trained to master blocking or roles in the script. In ludruk, the performers are used to being spontaneous on stage, and the dialogue and the plot derive from larger narratives. For instance, the plays “*Sakerab*” and “*Sarip Tambak Oso*”, had no script and yet the performers completely understood their respective roles. Whatever got the audience laughing and entertained.²⁰

‘Training’ or knowledge transfer in ludruk is similar to *nyantrik*²¹—which is about learning skills from artists who are considered experts (in the Javanese context) and where knowledge transfer

occurs by listening to and imitating the knowledge given by the teacher. The 'students' are usually people who are familiar with the ways of ludruk. These novice players are taught *ngeremo* (an opening dance to welcome the audience at the beginning of the performance), to play gamelan instruments, *jula juli* (verses sung containing messages of virtue, criticism, or humor), and *bedayan* (a dance by trans women while singing *jula juli*).²²

In teaching that prioritises quantity, the measure is an 'impact' that is not just an 'output'. For instance, if I were a teacher with an aim to teach mathematics to 10 children, the ideal outcome would be that the children would get a 9/10, and the impact would be that the parents become convinced that their children can master mathematics and can progress to the next grade. That's formal education.

Teaching as a companion is more qualitative in nature. It is a process of instilling faith in oneself. Paulo Freire said that transformation occurs if there is dialogue, and only if we position ourselves in equal standing to other subjects. In my engagement with ludruk, I position myself on equal footing—as a companion.

Assuming the role of a companion, meant that I interacted with policymakers and their associated communities. Of course, this was based on the community's interests in building networks. The point was to make sure they were able to access resources.



Figure 4: Work in progress "Tandak Samira", 2002, Moelyono, oil paint on canvas, 170X270cm. Photograph courtesy of Moelyono.

R: *I am interested in your process and reflection on how your role as a companion to the Ludruk group in Ketapang Kuning Village developed.*

M: We went through the process together, it was not a top-down approach. For instance, I once wrote a script with Mas Didik. My interest in folk resistance stories prompted me to ask Mas Didik

about how these stories of resistance mirrored everyday life, as I'd heard from Pak Totok Suprpto that there was a commotion at the sugar factory in Malang.

Mas Didik recalled the story. Next to the river, there was a sugar factory on the border of Mojokerto and Jombang where farmers and workers had been resisting the abuse of power committed by the owners of the factory. Based on our conversation, a script was made in which the character was no longer Sakerah, but had been adapted to honour and record the memory and imagination of the resistance of the people of Jombang.²³

While a number of factual references or recorded histories about this event exist, alongside data and archives that academics write articles from, here the community was using fiction, legend, folklore, and language to present their stories of resistance through 'their own version'. Here history is constituted through oral history, and these stories are conveyed through ludruk performances, as a way of preserving and passing them onto the next generation. Similar things have happened to canonical stories like *Sarip Tambak Oso* and *Sakerah*. They are stories that convey grand narratives of resistance and that represent characters and storylines adapted from real life experiences and the collective memories of the local community.

Ketapang Kuning Village, in general, has been a great support of the ludruk ecosystem as one that is ritually and culturally rooted in place. These shared cultural roots support the acceptance of ludruk, which makes transpuan performers feel comfortable living in the village. Examples of this are seen in Mbak Erma and in the non heteronormative marriage recognised by local institutions that are simply a part of everyday, mundane life. Here acceptance is the norm rather than ostracisation.

The lower working class use laughter as a strategy to survive. They face life with laughter. Everything is like a play/performance. For example, as I mentioned earlier there's a performer who is a *waria*²⁴, but she went on Hajj and they call her '*Haji*', and it's just a normal thing for the people. There's also a transpuan who is married, she works looking for and gathering grass as well as tending to the cows, and each time they perform, her husband stands by and waits for her. And it's just a normal thing for them. By that virtue, they come together as a democratic and egalitarian society and village.

R: *Do you mind sharing the method you use in your role as a companion?*

M: When I was working with NGOs, I learned to use Participation Rural Appraisal (PRA)²⁵ prior to mentoring and facilitation programs. Perhaps, now, not all researchers have that knowledge. Many researchers are different culturally and physically—we come from the 'city'—a middle class person coming into the village. When we come to the community, what role will we take or be given? In the current climate of research, I notice that researchers who work on and with transgender people tend to distance themselves from the community and objectify the latter.

As I was saying earlier, my approach to 'phase in' and 'phase out' means there is a handover of roles and capacities to continue what we have been doing together for the sake of sustainability. Let's take the illustration of urban farming training that's now trending. In terms of class, we should've already been able to see the difference between landlords and farmers. It is the rich who own the land, and this is obviously very unsustainable. What if the land is reclaimed? Does the 'supervisor' or the trainer understand that framework?

PRA emphasises the process of developing independence, self-determination, and the will to attain sustainability. As companions we are equipped with questions such as ‘what do we have for this community?’ ‘What role do we want to take?’ ‘What roles do people in the community need?’ It means we have to assume a role in the community based on their needs. The foundation of PRA is equality and realising that when we provide assistance, we’re not meant to be heroes.²⁶

To explain further, in the ‘phase in’ stage we map out how to come into the community and hold a dialogue to identify the needs and build them. For instance, in our ‘phase out’, we aim to build preschool based on ECCD. We have to ask how and what kind of education is available for children? If we’ve successfully built awareness on the importance of education for children in the Golden Age, we can proceed to train prospective teachers. What about the syllabus? Since this is contextual education, it’s always better to start from resources already available—for instance; creating a list of *lagu dolanan* (songs accompanying [traditional] games), traditional toys and games, daily foods, native plants, animals, and so on.

We then made the list into a module, with titles, materials and tools, and objectives (asking for example, what stimulation does the game provide for the children) then we put it into practice. After the module is finished, we can determine the management and organisation [of the school] together, and the supervisor (or in this case the artist) no longer assumes a role (thus they are ‘phased out’). It’s indeed quite implicit, but our presence is really more directed towards awareness building. A movement for any kind of change must be organised, and there has to be a transformation in society. Right now, activism (in the movement) is still treated as heroism, where in the end the hero appears as a saviour. What is missing is the community’s own sustainable movement. We give them the ‘weapons’ of logical thinking to support their ideas. In political propaganda it’s called indoctrination, but our language frames it as ‘facilitating’. I remember the words of Arief Budiman, an intellectual and activist who criticised the New Order, who said that ‘class suicide’ is necessary to form an equal footing among subjects. This could be equally applied to an artist who ‘dives in’ to a community.²⁷

ECCD uses the PRA method as an organising praxis for a movement for critical thinking. Those assuming the role of companions have the agency to provide knowledge-based inputs as fellow artists, exchange artistic and aesthetic ideas and experiences, as well as convey and share information culturally through shared art and cultural networks. In its praxis, art is intertwined with movement, organising, independence, and sustainability, and artists can assume various roles such as facilitator, agitator, innovator, motivator, curator, and networker.

Biography

Riksa Afiaty is an art worker living and working in Yogyakarta. She seeks to contemplate decoloniality in artistic practice and curatorial frameworks. She has been involved in exhibition-making and programming in Jakarta, Maastricht, Ljubljana, Brussels and Gwangju. In 2020, she co-initiated a residency project MARANTAU, which adopts the dynamics of movement, in-exile, distance from familiarity, and adaptation to work patterns and culture in new places. The project

questions what it means, in the words of Édouard Glissant, to errant and de-root. Currently, she serves as Head of Programming at the Indonesia Visual Art Archive.

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¹ See Moelyono. (1994) 'Art Exhibition Reflects Upon Development'. Eco Sounder No. 10 April.

² Ketoprak has some similarities to ludruk in that both are performing arts of theatrical drama. The difference is that ketoprak originated from Central Java, while ludruk originated from East Java. Ludruk plays are stories about everyday life inspired by anticolonial struggles. Meanwhile, ketoprak plays are stories based on Javanese ancient literature, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. (Subroto, 2023)

³ Gejok Lesung uses a pestle and mortar as its medium. When it is played with a certain rhythm, it produces a sound composition. They play the rhythm of pounding rice with the mortar and pestle in agricultural settings.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/@budhiwijayatv2274>

⁵ Translator's note: Javanese for pigeon cage.

⁶ Although it is a performance of gags and humor, ludruk always has a streak of resistance against authorities. The performances during the Dutch colonial period (around the 16th - 1945 century) told stories of heroic figures who opposed Dutch policies, such as *Sarip Tambak Oso*, who stole the wealth of the rich and rulers and redistributing them to the people who were victims of Dutch tax collectors and their accomplices. There was also *Sakerah* who fought the Dutch colonizers for seizing and buying sugar plantation land owned by farmers at low prices.

From 1930-1945, Ludruk performances often criticized the Dutch and Japanese governments. In 1933, Ludruk Organizatie was founded, initiated by Cak Durasim who was eventually arrested for the song that has since become a legend in the Indonesian ludruk scene.

⁷ The *Suroboyoan ngoko* dialect is the lowest tier of the dialect in the Javanese language. It is used to address people who are familiar, those with lower social/ economic status, or younger persons. This dialect is used in the performance to adapt with the audience common parlance. *Suroboyoan ngoko* is used to deliver humor to the common people (instead of the *priyayi* (elite)). This is in contrast to the Javanese *Krama*, which is the highest tier in the Javanese language for the *priyayi*.

⁸ The Communist Party of Indonesia (23 May 1914-12 March 1966) was born from the party of the Indonesian working class which led the peasants and the people against colonialism in radical ways. PKI was dissolved in 1965 after the G30S incident.

⁹ The Institute for People's Culture was established by members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI): D.N. Aidit, Njoto, M.S. Ashar, A.S. Dharta on August 17, 1950. Due to ideological similarities, many have suggested that LEKRA was affiliated with the communist party (particularly because its founders were also leaders of the party). Oey Hay Djoen (1929-2018), a member of the LEKRA Committee Central, expressed his objections to this link stating that: "in reality there is no organizational relationship between the PKI and LEKRA. That there are communists in LEKRA is true, like me. But we do not comply with everything that the Party declares. No!" (Djoen, 2008)

¹⁰ G30S marked the beginning of the darkest part of modern Indonesian history. From September 30, 1965, onwards, a series of mass killings took place, resulting in the reported deaths of tens of thousands to millions of people. They were targeted due to their alleged sympathies or affiliation with communism. Many were imprisoned without trial and subjected to torture and sexual assault. Several studies conducted today have revealed evidence of military involvement in the orchestrated mass killings of 1965-1966 in Indonesia, with then Army leader Major General Suharto playing a significant role. These events ultimately propelled Suharto to become the second president of the Republic of Indonesia (Melvin, 2018). The incident also specifically targeted the works of artists who were suspected of involvement with LEKRA. As a result these works were destroyed and banned. Moelyono added that during one training in Kebonsari Village in 1998 with *Yayasan Seni Rupa Komunitas* (YSRK, eng: Community Arts Foundation), he met residents who had buried gongs and other art instruments for fear of being connected with LEKRA. In his notes Moelyono wrote: "Getting the residents to start practicing *ketoprak* again was a bit difficult. Former *ketoprak* performers still remembered very well the performers being captured on the G30S as they were accused of being part of Gerwani and LEKRA; one of them was the teacher Sarnen, the leader and a star performer with who was a stunning singer. Before his execution, the executioner asked Sarnen to sing '*dandanggulo*.'" (Moelyono, 2008) . This experience was represented in *Lintang Desa* exhibition at Cemeti Art House in 2004"

¹¹ Ludruk groups generally adopt Javanese and Sanskrit names also used by military institutions. For example, the group formed by the Jombang District Military Command was named Putra Bhirawa and Bintang Jaya; ludruk group Gema Tribatra was under Balongsari Mobile Brigade Corps; Teratai Jaya was formed by Porong Mobile Brigade Corps' Center of Studies, Bhayangkara group under the Jombang Police, Trisula Dharma under the Rapid Action Forces Command (Kopasgat) at the Air Force Base Iswahjudi Madiun, and so on (Ishomudin 2013).

¹² At that time, Moelyono was interested in working with the idea of appropriation. Appropriation in art and art history refers to the practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original (Tate, 2022).

¹³ The video is available at "Moelyono Art" *Moelyono, didedikasikan untuk {almb} Mama Samsu: "Tandak Samira"* (Dedicated to the late Mama Samsu, Tandak Samira), 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX4woNp2v30&t=77s>

¹⁴ Works from the exhibition *Amok Tanah Jawa* were re-presented at Flinders University in 2018 as part of an open studio and a week-long residency program. See: <https://www.flinders.edu.au/museum-of-art/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2018/moelyono>. Accessed August 7, 2022)

¹⁵ According to the Cultural Office of the Special Region of Yogyakarta webpage (2014), *ketoprak* was first recorded in Yogyakarta in the 1920s and took place in the *priyayi*'s (elite) place: "The transition of the *ketoprak* instrument from mortar to gamelan that occurred in 1927 was preferred by the audience because gamelan made it easier for the audience to engage with the beauty of *ketoprak* performances." (Dinas Kebudayaan, 2014) *Ketoprak* storylines vary from historical events and heroic stories, to fairy tales and imaginary stories (Dinas Kebudayaan, 2012).

¹⁶ Ludruk is influenced by Islamic culture which prohibits women from performing. Since its inception, ludruk has consisted of male performers, and as such, the female parts were played by male performers. Over time the culture has changed to allow women to perform. (Nasrullah, 2017)

¹⁷ The acceptance of transpuan in East Java was made possible by the presence of *Wedokan* in *Lerok*, pioneered by Pak Santik in the 1920s, who, at the time, performed in women's clothing. Gender pluralism in traditional cultures, such as is reflected in folk arts, may have helped with the social acceptance of transgender people. In other East Javanese traditional arts such as *Reog Ponorogo*, there is *warok* (a leader of *reog*) and *gembalak* (an effeminate young male dancer) who have a teacher-student relationship in teaching, dancing and performing arts. In practice, it reflects a father-son relationship interlaced with care and erotic intimacy (Wilson, 1997).

¹⁸ *Pemberdayaan dan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK, eng: Family Welfare Programme) is a community organisation that empowers women to participate in development in Indonesia through social activities. The membership system is voluntary and consists of the wives of community leaders.

¹⁹ The interview was conducted in June 2022.

²⁰ Although not directly related, Pak Moel's statement led me to a quote from Fahrudin Nasrulloh (2011, np), whose script became my main guide in writing this interview. They state that, "The flexibility that Augusto Boal said is used as a tool for theater of awakening. A technique of performing a role so that the subordinate masses turn aware of who they are and understand what causes them to be exploited, as called for by Paulo Freire".

²¹ Oral historian Antariksa explains that *nyantrik* is a process of *residing, studying, working, and creating together* occurring between a teacher and a student: "Commonality is the primary foundation of the *nyantrik* process. This commonality is based on a moral perspective regarding the importance of sharing: knowledge will become superior knowledge only when it has been shared, absorbed and applied with others." (Antariksa, 2016, p. 11) The second stage of *nyantrik* is a process of performing the faith/belief that may be achieved through physical or spiritual experiences (*nglakoni*). According to founder of *Arboyo* ludruk troupe, Cak Lupus: "Actually, there is no technique to performing ludruk—it's self-taught. But, it requires consistency." (cited in Saputra, 2020).

²² In the interview with Mas Didik on August 15, 2022 via phone call, he added the term *nyebeng*: which means seeing a play live and participating in practice sessions with the senior performers until the actor is deemed proficient.

²³ The play *Geger Pabrik Gula* was based on the history of sugar cane and the sugar industry in Indonesia, which was estimated to have entered Java around the 18th century. At that time, the Dutch were very extractive through the *cultuurstelsel* (forced cultivation system). As the plantation management extracted profits for the colonial government and a handful of landowners, there was a note of resistance from the farmers, plantation workers, and sugar factory workers, where they carried out strikes, land burning, mass protests, and organised sugar factory workers' movements. (Dell and Olken, 2019)

²⁴ The term *waria* is an older Indonesian portmanteau term combining one word for woman (*wanita*) and one word for man (*pria*), and it is commonly used alongside and interchangeably with *transpanu*.

²⁵ *Participation Rural Appraisal* is a method that developed in the 1990s in Indonesia. PRA is an alternative social research, which rejects society as an object of research. The point of PRA is citizen participation. Residents together with researchers (generally from outside their area) are fellow subjects who carry out the research, analyzing and solving problems in their community according to local needs. Community facilitator, Ria Djohani (2012) explains: "Back in the 1990s, the word "participation" was still something that is quite 'taboo' in Indonesia. It was dangerous. It should be suspected. This might be why PRA as a methodology in approaching a program grew more popular. Participation in PRA turned instrumentalist might be due to the situation of the New Order era, which was repressive against critical voices."

²⁶ Moelyono formerly attended the PRA Method Training of Trainers organised by Plan International in Surabaya, then went directly to East Nusa Tenggara in 1999. He also visited the Center for Learning Resource, Pune, India to learn the methods and application of ECCD based on PRA methodology. During the interview, Moelyono mentioned some of his main references. The first one is Britha Mikkelsen's book on participatory research methods published in 1995. In 1988, Moelyono attended training based on Transformation theory using the PRA method at the Association of Science Researchers (API) in Jakarta. At that time, he was given Augusto Boal's translation of "Theatre of the Oppressed" and Paulo Freire's book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", whose theories were applied in PRA methods. He was very impressed, and it made him recall a cultural workshop that he attended with the Asian Council for People Culture (ACPC) in Manila, Philippines, in 1989 which implicitly applied the PRA method. Moelyono (2013) explains: "API provides a perspective on Transformative Social Science with participatory research methods – a combination of social research, educational work, and political action carried out by the community itself. Art is positioned methodologically as a participatory research medium with a framework of understanding; everyone can master and utilize art as a medium for analysis, dialogue, and critical thinking in seeking solutions to social problems in their community."

²⁷ The term "diving into the community" (*terjun ke masyarakat*) was popularised by LEKRA with their *Turba* (*turun ke bawah*, eng: descend to below) method. As an organisation of artists, LEKRA emphasises an "art for the people" approach. By following the principles of "togetherness" in: working together, eating together, sleeping together, artists are required to blend in with the community in an egalitarian manner (undertaking the same work, eating the same food, and sleeping in the same place) to be able to understand the circumstances and listen to the voice of the lower working class people.

Due to Moelyono's interest in ludruk as a folk art that critiques the oppression inflicted by the ruling class, and its narrative alignment with the everyday experiences of the lower class, the terms "people" and "the lower class" are used interchangeably within this article. Oral historian Hersri Setiawan (2011) explains that the "lower class" is "the group in society that suffers the most in their lives, and therefore is the first group to have an interest in change. In rural communities, they are poor peasants, farm laborers, or landless peasants. In urban society, they are the urban poor and workers who live from selling their labor. In coastal communities, they are poor fishermen and labor fishermen." Moelyono added, he thinks of *Turba* as an effort aiming to organise the lower class people. The PRA method is detailed and does not prescribe artistic characterisations, as the people and artists are fellow subjects. Moelyono also studied ATOR: Artist, Teacher, Organiser & Researcher with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) who are committed to using 'Theater of the People' for social change.