Indonesia’s Jemek Supardi
From pickpocket to mime artist

In Turnerian terms, the clown’s popular appeal, both sacred and secular, is summed up in his liminality. The foul mouthed and pot-bellied clown is at once particular and national, human and non-human, sacred and secular, backward and modern, vulgar and moral. In his little distorted frame, he encompasses complex local definitions of history, progress, subalternism, conformism, capitalism, and power.
Irving Johnson 2006

In essence Semar is not only the ‘property’ of the Javanese. The character of Semar is the property of the Archipelago. In fact, if we want to expand this notion further, then Semar can be considered as the property of Asia and the ‘trademark’ of Eastern culture.1
Djoko Suud Sukahar 2009

Introduction

In Indonesia, the art form of pantomime (usually referred to as ‘mime’) is rarely encountered.2 This disappointing fact is one of the major themes of the one and only book on the topic, Nur Iswantara’s Wajah pantomim Indonesia: Dari Seno

2 Iswantara 2007. My thanks to Susan Piper, Barbara Hatley and James B. Hoesterey for reading through earlier drafts, as well as to the two anonymous Bijdragen referees who have gently prodded, poked and moulded this article into what it is. Any errors or omissions, of course, are entirely due to me.

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Didi mime hingga gabungan aktor pantomim Yogyakarta (The face of Indonesian mime: From Seno Didi mime to the Yogyakarta pantomime actors network) (2007). This book is important as it historicizes the development of pantomime in Indonesia, which has been centred in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. According to Iswantara’s ground-breaking study, in Jakarta mime was first introduced as a popular art form in the late 1970s by the Jakarta-based duo, Seno A. Utoyo and Didi Petet (who performed as Seno Didi Mime). In the early 1980s they went on to perform in Malaysia and Singapore as well as the Asian Pantomime Festival in South Korea. They continued performing throughout the 1980s, including a so-called ‘colossal’ performance over two nights at the prestigious Taman Ismail Marzuki arts centre in Jakarta (Iswantara 2007). Other highlights of that decade include Indonesia’s first National Pantomime Festival in Jakarta in 1986. At this festival, it was an opportunity for the Jakarta-based duo and their supporters to witness the fruits of the parallel development of pantomime in Yogyakarta, which had been flourishing since the 1970s.

In Yogya, pantomime had blossomed as a result of the efforts of playwright, theatre worker and dance instructor, Moortri Poernomo, who was aligned with the Yogyakarta Theatre Workshop (Teater Bengkel Yogya). Each time Poernomo warmed up his students or fellow actors for a practice session or performance, he led them through a series of mime moves. He eventually wrote, directed and performed in a number of mime performances in the 1970s, which in turn inspired students such as Deddy Ratmoyo and ‘strays’ such as Jemek to launch their own mime performances in the early 1980s. In the following decades, there have been several pantomime festivals and numerous artists have dabbled with mime, including relatively unknown names such as Ende Reza and Nur Iswantara as well as bigger names in the field of Indonesian performing arts such as dancer and choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo. Jemek Supardi, however, has dominated the field, especially after the death of Seno A. Utoyo in 1998 and Didi Petet’s developing interest in film and television acting.

Despite this relatively rich history, as an art form pantomime is marginal in Indonesia. We could say the same about the life and career of its best-known practitioner, the Yogyakarta-based, ethnically Javanese, Jemek Supardi (Figure 1). However, this would only be partially correct. Certainly Jemek is almost completely ignored by academics. His name, misspelt as ‘Cemek’, is mentioned in just one sentence of the otherwise excellent book-length monograph on the performing arts of Java by Barbara Hatley (2008). There are no references to Jemek Supardi by scholars writing on similar themes, including Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2008) and Van Erven (1992). He is also ignored by many arts cliques, particularly those based in Jakarta and outside Java. Nevertheless, in the key centre of Indonesian performative arts, the city of Yogyakarta, Central Java, Jemek is an active member of several artistic
Figure 1. Jemek Supardi
Indonesia’s Jemek Supardi

troupes and he is a collaborator, friend and acquaintance of many within
the closely-knit arts scene, which in terms of diversity and sheer volume of
performances, is unique in Indonesia (Hatley 2008). Fortunately, in Indonesia
aesthetically-pleasing cultural expression, whatever the particular genre, is
generally held in high regard. This has encouraged artists such as Jemek, who
have thrived on the social and politicized nature of Indonesian culture, not
to mention the deep-seated Javanese cultural underlay of Indonesian politics.
Although mime is a niche art form in Indonesia, Jemek’s self-taught skill as
a pantomime artist is clearly evident and his reputation as a professional is
second to none, particularly in Yogyakarta.

As in the epigraph to this chapter, in many ways Jemek can be considered
as a clown, or a ‘liminal’ figure of fun (Figure 2). But, like the punakawan or
clown-servants of the Javanese, Balinese and Sundanese shadow and doll
theatre (wayang kulit and wayang golek) Jemek’s liminality encodes political
dimensions much deeper than mere ‘clowning around’. Of course, we must
first of all remember that an art form may have a supposed revolutionary
potential yet may never have concrete political effects. Similarly, clowns in
popular cultural expression may embody a politically subversive potential
yet may never have concrete political effects. Nevertheless, it is important
to remember that in the Southeast Asian context both cultural statements
and clowns in particular have historically played a pivotal role in giving
voice to popular concerns. It is equally important to pay attention to the
historical forces that have both facilitated and impeded that expression. If
we pay attention to both of the above dimensions underpinning a cultural
text, we shall see that the political impulse of culture in general and clowns in
particular is often latent. In this sense, the political impulse of artists
such as Jemek lies not only in the forms of their cultural texts, which can be
considered as tools of conveying political messages, but also in the lives of
the artists themselves who are, to some extent, embodiments of certain ideals.
To put it simply, through the figure of Jemek we can envision challenges to
Indonesia’s established forms of power, authority and categorization.

Mindful of Susan Sontag’s exhortation (1978) in Against interpretation that
the function of criticism is to ‘show how it is what it is’ rather than ‘what it
means’, this article will limit itself to a few modest claims about the social or
political nature of Jemek’s performative practice. Jemek’s oeuvre, even as
it challenges the traditional social and political order, ultimately reaffirms
the relevant codes. He is ‘merely’ a carnivalesque street artist, after all.
Nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration, or over-interpretation, to
claim that Jemek Supardi is Indonesia’s leading mime artist. Although he
primarily works and performs in a highly localized context, that is, in the
central Javanese cultural capital and court city of Yogyakarta, it can also be
claimed that Jemek’s art combines global and local epistemologies, practices
Figure 2. Jemek on Malioboro Street
and technologies. For instance, despite his reluctance to travel overseas, Jemek draws on tropes commonly associated with mime in the West, such as white face paint and striped shirts. He regularly performs with visiting international artists as well as globe-trotting Indonesian artists comfortable with the distinctive cosmopolitan milieu of contemporary international artists. Jemek is also unafraid of utilizing global media such as Facebook and blogs, and as mentioned his style and form of art borrow heavily from global as well as local sources.

In terms of structure, the body of this article will examine key elements of Jemek’s performative milieu, including his use of mime and silence as a mode of cultural and political expression and his use of white face paint as an expression of solidarity with the Javanese proletariat. The link between the personal and political elements of Jemek’s practice will also be examined, simultaneously highlighting the difficulty of applying any particular theoretical template onto his life and art. As we shall see, Jemek has long opted out of traditional social categories and constraints.

‘Bat’ Pardi and the punakawan

Born in Yogyakarta on 14 March 1953, Jemek is well past middle age but still very much a young-at-heart rogue. Physically, he is striking for several reasons. He is energetic and slim, with a diminutive frame. After living and performing for years with a bald pate combined with a scruffy pony-tail, unusually for an Indonesian man he has appeared for lengthy periods shaven-headed and as bald as a snooker ball. His arms, hands and fingers are agile, dexterous, expressive and effete. His legs are wiry and flexible. His voice is strong, guttural and throaty, coarsened by years of smoking cheap clove cigarettes. His accent and style of Indonesian is also striking; in short, it is as Javanese as gudeg. Among friends his manner is sardonic, wry and, in a word, nekad (mischievous). For instance, although he is extremely self-deprecatory, Jemek rarely hesitates in mischievously pointing out the foibles of his friends and colleagues, not to mention public figures. In terms of gender, when performing Jemek appears in sexually ambiguous terms; he is more androgynous than butch or manly. Nevertheless, his onstage persona does not convey the impression of effeminacy. Indeed, in full make-up mode – that is, with white face paint, broad red lips and exaggerated eyebrows – his carefully controlled physicality speaks of a broad spectrum of emotions. As I shall argue shortly,

3 For more on this type of physically and culturally mobile Indonesian artist, see Antoinette 2007.

4 Gudeg is a traditional food from Central Java and Yogyakarta in particular which is made from jackfruit boiled for several hours with palm sugar and coconut milk and is usually served with rice, chicken, hard-boiled egg, tofu and fried bean curd.
in the Javanese context Jemek’s androgynous appearance and white-painted face is a mask encoding a great deal of symbolism.

Before discussing some of the social satire embodied in Jemek’s mime theatre in more detail, it is important to note that Jemek’s life has not been easy. He has spent periods of his life as a street kid, pickpocket, grave-robber, car-park attendant and coffin-maker, among other forms of employment. This background has allowed Jemek, also widely known by his nickname of Pardi Kampret (‘Bat’ Pardi), to cultivate a deep empathy with the marginalized and the downtrodden, the deaf, the disabled and fellow buskers and artists. Jemek’s image as a man of the streets, or rather a man of the people, is encoded on his body, tattoo-like, by a popular performance practice ubiquitous to mime throughout the world: the use of white face make-up.

According to Jemek, the use of face paint is inspired by the *punakawan* of the Javanese *wayang wong* (human wayang theatre).\(^5\) The *punakawan* accompany the *satria* warrior or hero of whatever particular tale of the *wayang* is being performed, including the Pandawa heroes of the *Mahabharata* cycle, the boy Sumantri in the *Arjuna Sasrabahu* cycle as well as the monkey-hero Hanoman in the *Ramayana*. Although Magnis-Suseno (1997:183) suggests that the *punakawan* appear to be of purely Javanese origin, they have equivalents in Bali, West Java, Malaysia, Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, often with similar forms. Nevertheless, they are indigenous to Southeast Asia in the sense that they do not seem to have equivalents in the Indian epics, from which the majority of the characters and plots of the *wayang* pantheon derive.

For centuries, the *punakawan* of *wayang wong* (as well as the *wayang kulit* of Central and East Java and *wayang golek* of West Java), have been characterized by their white faces. But white face make-up is also ubiquitous in the world of mime, as epitomized by the character ‘Bip’, created and performed by Marcel Marceau, the great French mime artist. Marceau’s ‘Bip’ was characterized by his white pancake make-up, teardrop, charcoal-lined eyes and striped jumper. Given that Jemek often performs with teardrop, lined eyes, red lipstick and occasionally a striped T-shirt, it is tempting to claim that Jemek has also been profoundly inspired by Marceau. Yet Jemek missed Marceau’s one and only tour of Indonesia in the late 1970s and was performing mime for several years before Marceau’s tour. It is quite conceivable that Jemek’s mime developed in complete isolation from the French greats. In addition to this, Jemek’s mime developed, on the whole, in complete isolation from Indonesia’s leading mime artists of the 1970s and 1980s, the Jakarta-based duo, ‘Seno Didi Mime’ (Sena

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5 Personal communication with Jemek Supardi, Yogyakarta, 8-6-2009. Unless referenced otherwise, direct quotes or assertions from Jemek and his colleagues are based on interviews with the author over several years, primarily during field trips to Yogyakarta in 2007-2009. The author has personally attended over half a dozen performances by Jemek between 1998 and 2009, as well as training sessions, and has VCD and video-camera recordings of over a dozen performances.
A. Utoyo and Didi Petet). It is widely reported that Jemek drifted into mime simply because he found that he could not memorize the scripts of Teater Alam Yogyakarta, a theatre group he was associated with in the late 1970s (Iswantara 2007:70-1). Teater Alam was a theatre group under the leadership of Azwar AN; initially Jemek’s involvement was as an odd-job man. Mime, which did not involve learning lines or a script, was simply the best way for him to get himself onstage, as his colleagues had long been encouraging him to do.

In terms of artistic influences, according to Jemek the popular performance traditions of Java have proven to be most influential. As a child and teenager, he would often watch the punakawan acting out their slapstick tomfoolery. Images of the punakawan miming the hanging up of imaginary washing on imaginary clothes lines, or tripping each other over with imaginary trip-lines, or looking up in the sky at an attractive bird only to be splattered on the face by excrement, were instrumental in the early development of Jemek’s creative imagination. Jemek has often mimed these routines himself, as well as other well-worn routines such as the hoisting of caged pigeons or doves up a mast, a much-loved pastime for many Javanese men. In summary, Jemek has claimed in numerous interviews that his white face paint, and many of his routines, is inspired by the punakawan – claims that have been backed up by friends, colleagues, local exegetes and reiterated in each of my many interviews with Jemek himself. But Jemek has also suggested that he is interested in all sorts of physical comedy, including the films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Eddie Murphy, and a direct influence of the characters of any of the punakawan on him is unclear and perhaps unquantifiable. Perhaps also the comparison of Jemek with the punakawan can also be understood as a rhetorical strategy to domesticate what is essentially an aesthetically challenging mode of expression. So challenging that many of Jemek’s closest friends and colleagues I have spoken to – including manager Eko Nuryono, protégé Broto Wijayanto and well-known Yogya-based playwright and performer Whani Darmawan – are often puzzled as to what on earth Jemek is attempting to convey in his mime. Other observers have even suggested to me, somewhat mischievously, that quite often Jemek himself is just as confused.

Promoting the link between Jemek and the punakawan is a convenient strategy for both Jemek and audience alike. Of course, there are some morphological similarities between Jemek and the punakawan. But I do not

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6 Such a belief, from performers and audience alike, is certainly not out of place in the Javanese performative sphere. Many shadow puppeteers in Java, for instance, have confided to me that in the heat of a ritualistic or particularly spiritually ‘charged’ performance, they had little comprehension about what was happening, or why. In these cases, it was the puppeteer who was being ‘magically’ manipulated by the puppets, not, as one would expect, the other way around. In Java, performers’ comprehension of the deeper meaning of a cultural performance is not necessarily a given, especially if the performance is spontaneous, ritualistic or if one enters into a trance-like state during the performance itself.
want to overemphasize the whiteness of their faces at the expense of other similarities. After all, as one of the anonymous reviewers for this essay has pointed out, it is not clear about how white typical *punakawan* faces were before the influence of the European circus in the nineteenth century. Very possibly the white faces, and other features, were direct reflections of this ultra-popular urban entertainment. In the next few passages I will try and expand a little more on what is known about the *punakawan*, and what Jemek knows about them.

As Jemek has informed me on several occasions, the white-faced *punakawan* of the *wayang* are usually regarded as symbolic representations of the *rakyat* (the common people) of the Indonesian archipelago. As with all aspects of the *wayang* and its mythologies, the fact that the clown-servants have white faces is representative of a variety of deeply-held cultural and philosophical beliefs. According to some, the white face of Semar, the best known of the clown-servants, is said to reflect his honesty or integrity (*kebersihan*), wisdom (*wicaksana*) and purity of spirit (*kesucian*) (Mulyono 1978:51-7). According to other commentators his pale skin represents death; one of his tasks is to rein in the aggression or emotion of his superiors, as well as saving them from danger or indeed death (Haryanto 1995:70). According to Foley (1987), Semar’s black body and white face show the contrast between day and night. Similarly, the *punakawan* usually appear after midnight to guide their master along the correct path in life, in alignment with both traditional and Islamic beliefs that late at night is the best time to receive spiritual guidance (Mulyono 1978:60). After considering all of the above views, and speaking to several shadow puppeteers based in Central Java, I would suggest that in general the clown-servants’ white faces symbolize simple honesty and deep wisdom, characteristics widely regarded as attributes inherent to the common man.

Curiously, in terms of physique, Jemek strongly resembles the diminutive, wiry, cross-eyed cripple Gareng, the son of Semar, the most popular of the *punakawan*. In terms of character, Gareng is honest, uninterested in worldly wealth and incredibly observant with a dry sense of humour (Mulyono 1978:67). Coincidentally, Jemek shares each of these character traits. On the other hand, when Jemek is in full make-up mode, his image is androgynous, reminiscent of the hermaphroditic nature of Semar. In Magnis-Suseno’s words (1997:184), ‘Semar is unshapely and fat with large breasts and a huge bottom, so that it is not obvious whether he is a man or woman’. More importantly, Jemek shares a similar perspective on the world to the *punakawan*; a similar worldview, it could be argued, to clowns, fools and comedians throughout Southeast Asia (and indeed the world), who by their very presence are a critique of the worldview of officialdom, authoritarianism, dogma and narrow-minded seriousness.
The life and career of ‘Bat’ Pardi

Like Semar and his sons, Jemek is a scallywag with a heart of gold. He is also blessed with the cunning of an ex-street kid rather than the cosmopolitan wherewithal of many of Indonesia’s better-known artists and intellectuals. Tales abound of Jemek’s troubled childhood on the streets of Yogya, his past life as a pickpocket on the trains in and out of Yogya, his days as a grave-robber and his run-ins with cheap prostitutes and the local constabulary. This reputation precedes him, almost on a daily basis. For instance, consider the manner in which Jemek was introduced by MC Tedjo Badut at the 2009 collaborative performance between Jemek and musician and busker extraordinaire Sujud Sutrisno:

Ladies and gentlemen, please show your appreciation for Sujud Sutrisno, who has performed throughout Indonesia on various islands outside Java, including Sulawesi, Sumatra and Kalimantan. Meanwhile, Jemek Supardi has also performed on various islands outside Java, including Nusa Kambangan, Pulau Buru...

The sardonic humour in such an introduction lies in the widely-known fact that Nusa Kambangan is an Alcatraz-style prison island off the south coast of Java and Buru Island was the infamous island used to house left-wing exiles during the first few decades of Soeharto’s presidency. Novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer was the most famous of the Buru detainees (Maier 1999). Humour aside, it should be noted that there is no evidence of Jemek having links with left-wing political organizations, nor has he spent any time at Nusa Kambangan. But he has had many run-ins with local police and he has spent the odd night in Javanese prison cells ranging from Yogyakarta to Cirebon (Iswantara 2007:71-2). Consider the following account reported by Tarko Sudiarno (2008):

Jemek was once arrested for performing in public without a permit. He answered the police’s questions with gestures and expressions – speaking no words, using only body language to communicate with the angry officers.

‘At that time my friends said, “If it is like this, who is the crazy one?” It was tense but funny. The officers did not want to give up and I would not surrender’, Jemek recalled.

His ability to stay cool when confronted with the officers might have been the result of his past associations with the criminal world – he stole valuables from graveyards, worked as a pickpocket and was arrested by the police many times.

‘Look at my toes. The scars are still there, where they crushed my toes with a table leg to make me confess. They either crushed my toes or hit me in the legs with a hammer. Because they did it so many times, I stopped feeling pain when the police beat me’, Jemek said of his dark past.
Jemek’s first run-in with the police was when he was a primary school-aged boy; he was arrested and briefly detained for petty theft. As is widely known, for many years he was a member of a gang of pick-pockets on the trains heading in and out of Yogyakarta. It is not difficult to imagine that the necessary skills of the pick-pocketing trade have placed him in good stead for a career as a mime artist. These skills include spontaneity, an eye for detail, swiftness of hand, deftness of touch, dexterity, nimbleness of foot and a keen eye for opportunity. The same could be said for Jemek’s brief employment as a grave-robber, digging up and rifling through Chinese graves in search of expensive jewellery.

It could also be argued that Jemek’s father’s trade as a handyman, builder and grave-stone designer was just as influential, if not more so. Although he never seriously took up any of his father’s trades, he spent many afternoons as a child watching his father at work. Later in life, after marrying, Jemek purchased a modest house on Brigjen Katamso Street, near the south-eastern corner of the fort surrounding the Sultan of Yogyakarta’s palace. The significance of this location lies in the fact that this area is best known as the coffin-making centre of Yogyakarta; not surprisingly Jemek supplements his meagre income constructing coffins. According to one interview:

‘It’s impossible to be able to live by depending on the income from pantomime alone. If there’s a request for a performance, at the most I’ll be paid Rp. 500,000, whereas in order to live with one child and one wife on a monthly basis you clearly need more than my income from that one performance alone’, he says.

As a result, Jemek has a side-job which happens to be right in front of his eyes. ‘I just go and work as a coffin-maker. It’s not too bad, from one coffin that’s sold you can get a commission of about 10% of the selling price’, he says.7

Those familiar with Jemek’s oeuvre have observed that death, coffins and funerals have long been recurring motifs in his performances. As Sudiarman (2008) explains:

Having been in a grave, Jemek is not afraid of death. In 1998 he performed a piece called Bedah bumi (Exploring the earth), which he put on in Kintelan cemetery, not far from his house.

In front of the house, he pretended to die and his neighbours put his body in a coffin. The coffin was then carried to the graveyard in a procession, just as it is

7 Makelar 2008. ‘Nggak mungkin bisa hidup hanya mengandalkan penghasilan dari main pantomim. Kalau ada order, paling saya hanya dibayar sekitar Rp 500.000, sementara untuk hidup bersama satu anak dan satu istri dalam sebulan jelas lebih dari penghasilan saya sekali pentas’, ungkapnya.

Karenanya, Jemek perlu pekerjaan sampingan yang kebetulan berada di depan matanya. ‘Saya jadi makelar peti mati. Lumayan, satu peti mati yang laku bisa mendapat imbalan 10% dari harga jual’, ungkapnya.
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done when a person dies.

Along the way, many people were ‘deceived’ into thinking he was actually dead – they were not aware that it was a performance, with several flower vendors tossing out handfuls of petals when the coffin passed in front of their stalls.

‘Poor Jemek. Yesterday afternoon he greeted me. Now he is dead’, Jemek quotes a flower vendor as saying upon seeing the procession.

In 2006, he performed a show with death as its theme in Batu, Malang, East Java. The performance was spontaneous, taking place during the funeral of the mother of literary man Sindunata. Jemek entertained the deceased’s family with his pantomime show, turning mourning into amusement.

The ‘literary man’ Sindunata is also a fully-trained Catholic priest, not unlike the other great ‘literary man’ and priest of Yogyakarta, the late YB Mangunwijaya (Bodden 1996). It is a rarely-reported fact that Jemek is a Catholic. This in itself is not unusual; many of Yogyakarta’s most prominent artists and intellectuals are Catholic and Catholic networks open certain opportunities for them. But it needs to be stressed that Jemek is not a practicing Catholic. Prominent Yogyakarta-based poet and cultural activist Emha Ainun Nadjib joked at a concert following a Jemek performance in 2009 that Jemek’s religion is ‘agama Jemek’ (the religion of Jemek).⁸

Politics and autobiography: from 1998 to 2009

Unable to bring himself to attend mass in the manner of the average churchgoer, Jemek prefers to pursue his faith through his performance art. Indeed, this may explain why so many of Jemek’s performances appear to be heavily charged with a deep sense of spirituality. For instance, his 1998 performance as part of the ruwatan bumi (earth exorcism) series of arts events, ‘Dewi Sri tidak menangis’ (Dewi Sri isn’t crying), was deeply moving and intensely spiritual, highlighting an important aspect of the animistic beliefs of Java. By the title alone we can see that it is an allusion to Dewi Sri, the ancient Javanese goddess of rice and thus life, fertility, and prosperity. Despite the title’s suggestion that Dewi Sri was not crying, like many of the cultural performances at the time (Clark 1999) it was very much a reference to the way in which the Indonesian nation circa April 1998 was beset by calamity on all sides (Hatley 2008). These ‘calamities’ included the Asian economic crisis, the decimation of Indonesia’s currency (the rupiah), rising petrol and basic food item prices, locust plagues and widespread occurrences of dengue fever. In terms of plot, the performance itself was quite simple, primarily involving

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⁸ My thanks to an anonymous Bijdragen referee, who was in the audience on this occasion, for alerting me to this comment.
Jemek making a sacrifice to Dewi Sri. The raw emotion of the performance was established through the mournful violin-based musical accompaniment and the anguished look on Jemek’s face as he turned to the heavens beseechingly, not to mention the addition of a Marcel Marceau-esque teardrop on Jemek’s made-up face. The underlying allusion to the pain of Dewi Sri could be easily interpreted by any Javanese, let alone Soeharto, who was quintessentially Javanese and often displayed a reverence for the ancient animistic beliefs and rituals of Java (Elson 2001). History demonstrates that Soeharto resigned within a month of Jemek’s performance.

Like the punakawan as they take centre stage during the gara-gara scene of a wayang performance, Jemek’s mime regularly comments on the state of the Indonesian nation, its people and its politics. Most obviously, he does this by highlighting the foibles of contemporary Indonesian political culture. On more than one occasion Jemek has elected himself as an ‘alternative’ politician, even as an ‘alternative’ president. For example, in the month before the fall of Soeharto in May 1998 Jemek performed ‘Badut-badut Republik’ (The Republic’s Clowns) on a forklift, touring the streets of Yogyakarta whilst wearing a suit and tie and holding a bulging briefcase. Surrounded by an entourage of motorbikes, Jemek’s face was painted white. In between clinging on to the forklift in order not to lose his balance, Jemek remonstrated from above. His forklift platform was almost transformed into a presidential lectern. Jemek’s 1998 parody – simultaneously raising the political and economic elite on to a pedestal and transferring them to the realm of the comical – was a street-level reminder to Indonesia’s establishment that their motivations, actions and misdeeds are being watched, judged and mocked by the ‘common people’. At the time, Jemek’s profile was extremely prominent. Besides conducting a series of high-profile mime performances on the streets and theatres of Yogyakarta and Jakarta, he also hit the newspaper headlines with his epic day-long performance on the Yogyakarta-Jakarta train. Fully made-up, throughout the day Jemek roamed the carriages, striking up silent ‘conversations’ with his fellow passengers, waiters, food sellers, ticket inspectors and accompanying journalists.

As he has aged, instead of mellowing out, Jemek’s worldview has become increasingly opposed to Jakarta’s official culture with its prevailing truth and its established order. Moreover, Jemek continues to share the wayang clown-servants’ keen eye for their surroundings, be it social or political, local or national, as well as the ability to direct laughter towards those very same surroundings. More recently, Jemek has become much more ‘outspoken’ (as far as mime artists can be outspoken) on issues of social and political significance. Most striking in this regard was Jemek’s mock-presidential campaign in early 2009, where he nominated himself as the silent leader of the equally silent Partai Pantomim (Pantomime Party). His campaign slogan read:
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Pantomim, tanpa bicara banyak bekerja (Pantomime, without talk hard work) (Figure 3). This phrase is quite possibly a plesetan or inversion of a similar concept long-popularized in Indonesia: NATO (No Action Talk Only). Such was the popularity of Jemek’s seemingly serious run for presidency, he was invited to perform ‘Pura-pura jadi capres’ (Pretending to be a presidential candidate) in rural Java and Makassar, South Sulawesi. More ambitious, and artistically more substantial, was his 2009 performance, ‘Caleg Brutussaurus’ (Brutussaurus the legislative candidate). By the title alone we can see both the political orientation and unbridled parodic intent. Of course, even as Jemek dressed up in a presidential peci (black head-cap), suit and tie, cash-for-votes in hand, his parody was accentuated by the ‘lower-class’ clothes he wore together with his presidential attire, that is, jeans and sandal jepit (cheap thongs) (Figure 4).

When I questioned Jemek about what he was aiming to do with these blatantly political performances, he explained that it was his duty to reveal the corruption of Indonesia’s political elite, in a good-natured way. His manager, Eko Nuryono, is more expansive:

For a long time Jemek has needed to raise his profile. In the past, his profile was at its greatest in the period preceding the fall of Suharto, in 1998. I wanted to re-ignite Jemek’s profile as a mime artist for the contemporary political era, when his perspective is needed more than ever. The more political his performances, the greater his public profile, and I think a mock ‘campaign’ such as this is an excellent way of ensuring that Jemek becomes more marketable in the future, so that his art form is not forgotten and his name as a leading artist is much more prominent. He certainly deserves to be much better known.

A more recent performance, ‘Matamati’ (Dead eye) (2008), was a slightly more subtle act of autobiographical art. Depicting the anguished experience of a man undergoing an eye operation, the production starring Jemek and his protégé Broto Wijayanto occurred a few months after Jemek had an operation to remove a cataract from his right eye. Ostensibly an expression of thanks to those friends and colleagues who had supported Jemek in his hour of need, ‘Matamati’ was felt to be one of the most serious performances of his career. The performance was greeted with a great deal of critical acclaim, with several positive reviews in the local newspapers. The performance was also Jemek’s way of saying thank you to his many friends and supporters. In particular, Jemek was grateful for the financial support of one of Yogyakarta’s biggest national television and theatre personalities, Butet Kartaredjasa. Upon hearing about Jemek’s cataract diagnosis Butet was determined to provide assistance.

9 My thanks to Jim Hoesterey and Christian von Luebke for pointing this out to me.
Figure 3. Partai Pantomim Campaign Poster
Figure 4. President Jemek
Aware of Jemek’s distrust of the medical profession – and his alleged propensity to spend any extra cash on gambling or other frivolities – Butet paid the eye surgeon directly.

‘Glocalized’ collaboration: 2008 and 2009

For several decades Jemek has worked closely with many contemporaries of the Yogyakarta arts scene, including Butet. For example, he often sends draft mime ‘scripts’ to leading writer and journalist Seno Gumira Ajidarma. Based on my discussions with Seno, who is now based in Jakarta, Jemek sends his scripts to him because he regards Seno as being more ‘literate’, and thus a better thinker, than himself. Jemek first came to know Seno in Yogyakarta in the 1970s, when they were both members of Teater Alam, and they have remained good friends since then. Jemek has also worked with one of Indonesia’s leading avant-garde wordsmiths, the Yogya-based poet and visual artist Afrizal Malna. Jemek’s ‘Matamati’ performance, for instance, incorporated video art filmed and produced by Afrizal. These film clips were based on Jemek’s pre-operation visit to the famous eye doctor of Yogyakarta, Dr Yap.

Artists such as Butet, Seno and Afrizal could quite comfortably fit into what Antoinette (2007:226) describes as Asia’s new class of international, mobile ‘cosmopolitan’ artist ‘that now oscillates between myriad geographic, cultural, social, and institutional spaces’. Although Jemek cannot quite be included in such a grouping – he does not yet carry out regular international travels on the passport of ‘international mime artist’ – he is comfortable with artists such as these, who are happy to draw on local experiences in Indonesia for their artistic practice. Jemek is also comfortable working with artists of his own social habitus, who are more likely to regard ‘overseas’ travel as a trip to nearby Sulawesi. For example, over several evenings at the 2009 Yogyakarta Arts Festival Jemek performed with musician Sujud Sutrisno and poet Emha Ainun Nadjib, both of whom are far more well known within Indonesia than overseas. It is pertinent to note that Jemek’s collaboration with Sujud, simply entitled ‘Kolaborasi’ (Collaboration), was primarily a reflection on the divergent life calling of both artists. On first impression, these contemporaries of the Yogya arts scene seem to have a great deal in common: roughly the same age, height and ethnicity, a similar level of modest career success and a similar level of poverty. According to newspaper reports appearing before the performance, their friendship spans three decades, stemming from their days at Teater Alam. Amongst audience members ‘in the know’, the pairing of the two seemed to be a perfect combination and, if anything, well overdue.

The first part of the performance consisted of Jemek dressing up Sujud in a black-and-white striped shirt, applying white face paint, red lips and...
a teardrop to his face. Much humour was associated with Sujud getting his pants on and off whilst protecting his modesty. Sujud then dressed up Jemek as a busker, painting some hair on his forehead, a moustache and hanging a *kendang* (double-headed drum) over his shoulders. This simultaneously highlighted Jemek’s usual habit of using a striped shirt – *costume de rigueur* for mime artists – as well as his baldness and his unease with playing or even handling musical instruments. Overall, the aim was for Jemek to crudely resemble Sujud in appearance and likewise for Sujud to crudely resemble Jemek. Before he transformed himself into a busker, however, Jemek attempted – painfully yet humorously – to teach Sujud how to do some basic mime manoeuvres, such as walking with an imaginary walking stick, walking up an imaginary hill, walking into the wind and gathering up and carrying mushrooms (Figure 5). Sujud was a spectacular failure at each task. Then Sujud, equally unsuccessfully, attempted to teach Jemek how to play a few basic tunes on the *kendang*.

After much laughter on the part of both the performers and their audience, thankfully both men decided that they were best suited to their own art form: Jemek with mime and Sujud with the *kendang*. So Sujud performed a set of hilarious ditties with Jemek spontaneously miming the actions to the words, with uproarious results. Much of the humour was related to the speed of Sujud’s lines and the increasingly desperate efforts of Jemek to keep up with the appropriate actions, which were in many cases very obliquely related to the lyrics. The moral of the ‘failed’ experiment in swapping roles, according to Jemek, was that each of us is best suited to be ourselves, even if the grass appears to be greener on the other side:

People always believe that they will be happy if their lives could be like someone else’s, but if that were to somehow happen there is no guarantee that they would obtain the happiness they were after. So the main thing is that people should be themselves, give thanks for whatever they have been blessed with by God; that’s the way to live a happy life.10

This attitude was highlighted several days later during Jemek’s performance with a cohort of deaf and disabled youth at Yakkum Rehabilitation Centre in the northern suburbs of Yogya. For over a year in advance, the youngsters had been trained in the art of mime by Jemek’s right-hand man and protégé Broto Wijayanto, who is fluent in sign language (Figure 6). The concert featured music and a series of mime skits, culminating with Jemek’s appearance on stage, 10 *Kolaborasi* 2009. ‘Orang selalu membayangkan dirinya akan bahagia jika hidupnya bisa seperti tokoh lain, tapi jika itu dilakukan belum jaminan ia bisa bahagia seperti yang dibayangkan. Maka yang penting manusia jadilah dirinya sendiri, syukuri yang telah Tuhan anugerahkan, itu-lah jalan untuk bisa hidup bahagia.’
where his mime portrayed a carer pushing a wheelchair with great difficulty, overcome with melancholy, his face morose and shoulders slumped. The teardrop on his cheek seemed larger than life. Yet this emphasis on pathos and physical frailty soon segued into a character-building exercise. Abandoning his wheelchair, Jemek busily manoeuvred his way around the stage, which was populated by the troupe of mournful-looking white-faced Yakkum mime artists. One-by-one, he silently greeted each character, smiled at them and raised each of their hands in the air and aimed their faces skyward. Jemek’s intervention was a rallying call for victory, hope and strength in the face of adversity. Jemek, with an even broader smile on his face, raised his hands alongside them, encouraging each actor to raise their hands higher, in harmony with him. The teardrop had faded into insignificance and the Yakkum characters’ faces were now transformed with smiles of joy. The clear emotional messages of hope and a shared sense of humanity were undeniable.

Despite his appearance as a man of the streets and a friend of vagabonds, buskers and the deaf and blind, business-wise Jemek is quite canny, in the typical manner of an ex-street kid. In recent years he has employed an extremely active, technology-savvy and devoted manager, Eko Nuryono. Such is the reputed difficulty of managing Jemek and reining in his boundless artistic potential, Eko is firmly of the belief that if he can manage Jemek, then he can manage anyone. Indeed, word of mouth has worked in Eko’s favour and he has recently secured part-time employment with the management and production of other artists and artistic troupes in Yogyakarta, including Emha Ainun Nadjib’s highly-acclaimed troupe of gamelan musicians, Kiai Kanjeng. For the tireless Eko, Jemek-related duties include answering email and sms messages addressed to Jemek, updating Jemek’s website and Facebook site, and marketing and negotiating the terms of agreement for each of Jemek’s performances and workshops. It is through Eko’s helping hand that Jemek can be unashamedly categorized as a ‘glocalized’ performer, albeit with an emphasis on the local.

Eko has also ensured that all of Jemek’s activities are well documented, both in terms of still photographs and video recordings. In fact, so rigorous is Eko in this task that he has even taken a selection of photographs of the author of this article, tape recorder in hand, interviewing Jemek (Figure 7). Commentators on Jemek’s Facebook page have made interesting observations. For example, one commentator jokes that what is the point of interviewing a mime artist; after all, all you will hear from Jemek is silence! Two other commentators are amused by the fact that Jemek’s interviewer appears to be Jemek’s ‘twin’ (the two of us, after all, share the same hairstyle). These comments, I would suggest, help explain why the larger-than-life Jemek persona has imposed itself on me so dramatically, for over a decade. In many ways the two of us are polar opposites: the untamed anarchic artist of the
street versus the staid fly-in fly-out academic. But in some ways, such as our baldness, our rural roots (I grew up in a country town in New South Wales, Australia), our idiosyncratic natures – in short, our mutual alterity – we are mirror images, or at least distorted funfair mirror images, of each other.

Placing this outburst of self-reflexivity aside for the moment, I have a few closing observations to make about Jemek Supardi, undeniably Indonesia’s most well-known mime artist. Usually, via his manager, Jemek is hired by corporate or non-government organizations to perform. On the odd occasion he is commissioned to perform by local government agencies. For example, as discussed earlier, in 2009 Jemek was invited to collaborate with the well-known busker and musician, Sujud Sutrisno, to provide an added dash of colour and pizzazz to the 2009 Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Arts Festival), funded by the local Yogyakarta municipal government. Jemek has also performed at the 2008 Festival Kesenian Surabaya (Surabaya Arts Festival), which was funded by the local Surabaya municipal government.

It is pertinent to note that over the years Jemek has had to fight for the opportunity to perform at arts festivals. Indeed, Jemek’s performance ‘Pak Jemek pamit pensiun’ (Mister Jemek’s impending retirement) (1997)
was a direct criticism of the organizing committee of the Yogyakarta Arts Festival, which had neglected to include mime in the previous few festivals (Sindhunata 1999:405). Jemek decided to conduct his own ‘renegade’ performance, unfunded and uninvited. Dressed in black, with his face painted in the usual white, Jemek approached the festival gates and began his silent protest. However, he was soon turned away by the festival’s security guards, infuriating Jemek even more. The remainder of his protest was enacted on Malioboro Street, the main thoroughfare of Yogyakarta, causing a massive traffic jam (Pantomimer 2008). Jemek’s protest performance bore fruit in the following year’s festival, when he was invited to perform in collaboration with the Yogyakarta Pantomime Actor’s Network (GAPY) which, as implied in its name, is a Yogyakarta-based mime troupe. Jemek has been a regular participant in the festival ever since, where audiences can watch him perform for free. Jemek’s performances, which have a communal atmosphere despite being often associated with bureaucratic institutions and local businesses, are usually free to the general public.

In closing, it is important to note that Jemek translates foreign as well as indigenous cultural elements into his local performative milieu. For instance, by wearing white face paint almost every time he performs, Jemek simultaneously ‘glocalizes’ the international character of mime as well as re-asserts his indigenous philosophical stance. The international aspect of his artistic statement might be inadvertent; Jemek admits the fact that mime artists overseas have long worn white face paint is merely a coincidence. He certainly missed the great Marcel Marceau’s one and only tour of Indonesia in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, Jemek is well aware of the similarities between his own popular mime form and the work of the French greats, as well as his own limitations in this regard. For instance, when he performed in 2008 alongside Philippe Bizot, a visiting French mime artist — who, incidentally, had trained under Marcel Marceau — Jemek was in some regards outclassed, but not overawed. Critics highlighted the greater technical proficiency of the Frenchman whilst congratulating Jemek for his greater degree of warmth and spontaneity. Jemek himself was underwhelmed by his international collaborator, regarding him as ‘aloof’ (cuek), lacking in versatility and, most peculiarly, uninterested in practising before the performance.

**Conclusion**

On one level, Jemek’s chosen art form, which, through its emphasis on silence, gesture and raw expression, challenges the dominant symbolism of the state. How does he do this? Like many other Javanese artists who have used dance or silence as a socio-political strategy (Hatley 2008; Hughes-Freeland 2008),
by refusing to use the language of the state, Jemek’s silent communication is an alternative symbolic mode. Also, given the many political issues Jemek’s oeuvre examines – including political corruption, economic mismanagement, environmental degradation, poverty and military brutality – his work is undeniably political. On another level, stylistically and thematically Jemek’s performances intermingle political issues with popular performance practices common to the Central Javanese cultural context, such as the physical comedy of wayang wong.

Does the figure of Jemek undermine the widely-held notion that in times of political turmoil figures of fun are little more than apolitical agents of comic relief? Mindful of Sontag’s call to interpret art for ‘what it is’ (rather than ‘what it means’), this question can be answered in two ways. On the one hand, despite the seductive distractions of the clown – including the political clown, whose job it is to distract attention from real issues through humour or extravagant behaviour – it is clear that the established forms of power and authority continue unabated. On the other hand, in contrast to this doleful scenario, in the Javanese context Jemek’s ‘glocalized’ use of mime and local Javanese imagery suggests that patterns of hierarchy, and other Javanese cultural practices, are subject to challenge and transformation.

As I have suggested, Jemek’s deliberate use of white face paint symbolically links him with both the subversive potential and the proletarian nature of the wayang’s clown-servants. Of course, this article has also emphasized Jemek’s identity as a practitioner of a glocalized art form and a participant in a vibrant cosmopolitan art scene. This article has also described the way in which Jemek, like the clown-servants of the wayang, is much more than a mere clown. He is so much deeper than that. Similarly, it can also be argued that the figure of the clown, whether it be an indigenous or glocalized variant on this theme, continues to play a part in shaping the ‘beautiful’, potentially violent energy which is essential to the formation of the state in the Southeast Asian region (Day 2002).

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