CHAPTER 12

Notes from the 2009 Symposium on Performance in Indonesia

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I am about to tell a story about a symposium held at a university site, unlike the usual type of academic event taking place in university environments. Departing from the familiar ‘dramaturgy’ of a scholarly symposium, its aim was to place various cultural productions on the table in order to create a conjoined practical map. The mapping process was seen as a possible way for cultural producers in Indonesia to define common concerns and envisage future collaborations. The map we managed to draw together was a sketchy one, full of ellipses. This is its story.

Early in 2009, a decade after 1998, I was invited to take part in reorganizing mspi, Masyarakat Seni Pertunjukan Indonesia. The Indonesian Society for the Performing Arts. This body, established in the early 1990s, had supported the performing arts in Indonesia through its efforts to strengthen knowledge infrastructure by facilitating research, publications, and seminars in the field. However, over the preceding few years, the board members of the institution, including prominent figures in the Indonesian performing arts such as Sardono W. Kusumo and Sal Murgiyanto, had felt an increasing need to find ways to resituate the institution within the current context of performance and cultural aesthetics. Our preliminary discussions emphasized the fact that the artistic practices of the performing arts in Indonesia had always been part of the larger sphere of cultural performance production. Hence, to find new ways of facilitating the development of knowledge infrastructure in Indonesian performing arts, we must first draw the current map of our performance culture and its stakeholders.

Based on this idea, I initiated a small group discussion involving several individuals from various practices and disciplines. Intan Paramaditha who had initiated a cinema studies group in Jakarta, and Yudi Ahmad Tajudin, artistic director of Teater Garasi Yogyakarta, were the first to respond enthusiastically to the invitation. Nuraini Juliastuti, Kunci Cultural Studies Center’s co-director, and Ade Darmawan, director of the video arts collective ruangrupa in Jakarta, completed the circle.

In our first few meetings, we managed to establish several key parameters within our contemporary cultural field, derived from our own experience and
observation. Initially, we used the term ‘performance production’ to refer to practices in theatre, dance, performing or performance art. But later we concluded that ‘performance’ has become an important mode of expression and engagement within a larger field of cultural production, which includes public campaigns, festivals, demonstrations, and other diverse cultural and political events.

Over the last decade, cultural productions in Indonesia have explored areas wider than was possible during the New Order regime. Some of the actors involved in these processes may now even despise the term reformasi, political reform, but in 1998 they would have uttered the word with a strikingly emphatic and hopeful tone. They had taken part in overthrowing a regime and moved forward. Some of them now perform complicated urban and alternative space projects, some facilitate workshops to empower the community, turning cultural consumers into producers, some work on experimental arts, some explore the possibility of artist-initiated practices, some redefine activism, some engage in alternative academic work regardless of the lack of support from the formal institutions. In sum, they have made ways to engage with the public through paths that have never been traveled before. Over this past decade, the audience has been rendered surprised, shocked, perplexed, amazed, nauseated, bored and/or empowered by their performances.

From this realization, we decided that it was about time to find out how these cultural actors in their diverse forms of practice situate and conceptualize their activities, and what kind of findings they gather from these practices. For this endeavour, the small circle that we had formed was clearly no longer adequate to address these big, hypothetical questions.

Setting Up

So there we were in a three-day event, gathering in a conference room at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta at the end of 2009. Some of us in that room were activists, scholars, visual artists, while others were performance and theatre artists, musicians, journalists – individuals from various fields and backgrounds. Some of the participants would present their on-going projects, questions, assumptions and hypotheses, strategies and agendas; work to be done. All of us, about a hundred individuals, would be expected to speak and listen. Exchanges were about to happen.

There were no keynote speakers, no panels, and no paper presentations. What we had were only focus group discussions. This was more like a workshop forum, but in terms of scale we aimed at a wide array of topics; 12 focus