

## **Music of Asia: Its Past, Present and Future**

**Aki Onda**

What kind of music is being played in contemporary Asia? Where did it come from, and how will it develop in the future?

In 2016, TPAM is launching a music program that will introduce Asian artists, in the context of the platform's "Asian focus" since 2015. I am flattered to be appointed Director of the program. In Asia, unprecedentedly new forms of musical expression have been evolving through a combination of many factors, including economic growth, changes in political systems, increased freedom of expression, the diffusion of information over the Internet and the influence of traditional cultures. In short, it's quite exciting. Couldn't we create a program that would let our audience and participants experience these dynamic changes, one that also takes historical considerations into account?

However, it is dangerous to identify music easily using "Asia" as the sole framework; with the complex situation involving countries, regions, histories, ethnic groups, religions and interactions with other cultures, music exists in overwhelmingly many different ways in Asia. It can be said that "Asia" embraces countless musics. The only and best way to gain understanding of that must be to physically visit each country and region and research into the situation on the ground. I would also like to involve curators, academics and specialists who are well-informed about the situation, in such forms as commission or co-curation, to explore deeply into music that is rooted in the local history, culture and context.

In Asian countries, not only music itself but also arts organizations that assist and disseminate it as well as public infrastructures that support these organizations have gradually been developing. It must be important to meet not only artists but also organizers to consider joint projects and to build international network with the future in mind.

I decided to start with Vietnam and Indonesia. The following is my informal notes of what I saw and heard there in a diary-like style. It would have been very lengthy if I had written everything about everyone that I met and every place that I visited, so it tells only about what strongly impressed me.



## Hanoi

**November 8, 2015**

Looking through the window of a taxi from Noi Bai International Airport to the hotel, red signs with Communist slogans are lined up along the expressway. It is impossible to be unaware of the fact that I came to a country where the Communist Party monopolizes politics. The closer I get to the city, the more motorbikes I see. An inconceivable number of motorbikes cover the streets. Many ride double, and I see even four riding together: a housewife wearing a miniskirt holds a child and two more are on the rear saddle. The taxi slowly moves in the middle of the waves of the motorbikes... An exotic downtown landscape in slow motion. Jumbles of stores that sell all kinds of daily necessities. People sitting on low plastic chairs, eating at restaurants that extend themselves out onto the sidewalks as if they want to intervene in the flow of pedestrians. Sounds from thousands of car horns merge with the bustle... The city is unexpectedly lively.

**November 9**

I meet Kim Ngoc, a composer, at a cafe in Goethe-Institut in the morning. Her late father was a composer too, and she started to study the piano in infancy at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music. According to her, “Of course, you are required to study boring Soviet repertoires...” She obtained a grant and studied contemporary music in Germany. She has also studied Vietnamese traditional music before and after that. Her works spread over compositions that involve theatrical elements, presentation of them in the form of performance, installation as its extension and development, and mixed-media “music theatre.” As her background might indicate, there are very academic aspects in her works, but I also find a punk feeling (not necessarily because of her short hairstyle with a strand grown long). Eccentric elements are employed both sonically and visually, and the balance is kept. She is also the director of DomDom, which teaches experimental music to young musicians, and organizes Hanoi New



Kim Ngoc and Son X, musician and her partner

Music Festival. They stimulate the Vietnamese scene, which has just started to evolve. She lists young musicians that she thinks I should meet, before saying farewell. She is optimistic about the future of the scene: “Young artists who are well-informed about international scenes have been emerging, so I think the Hanoi scene is going to develop rapidly.”

The next meeting is with Vũ Nhật Tân, one of the leading figures of the avant-garde music scene of this city, and Ms. Huong who works with The Japan Foundation’s Hanoi Office, at a cafe called Manzi where art and music people get together. Vũ Nhật Tân composes differentiating and combining various styles including classical, electronic and field recording. It might appear that he is unprincipled, but probably there is an attitude toward a multifaceted understanding of the entity called Hanoi beneath his approach... His album, *Sound from Apartment Blocks*, is a soundscape created through layering field recordings in the city and electronics. In another project, he creates “a kind of ‘noise music’ by presenting Hanoi per se,” in which “livelihood is extremely noisy.” His activity as a producer supporting traditional musicians is idiosyncratic for the city. He organizes traditional music concerts regularly at the cafe Manzi and sometimes at theaters and temples. “Hanoi is a city with a rich history of 1,000 years, and the music developed there is rich and diverse as well. In the concert series ‘Music Story of The Old Quarter,’ we aim to introduce the history in a way that connects it to the contemporary reality.” He is familiar with players of traditional instruments, and will introduce me to one of the masters Xuân Hoach.

I had been in touch with Ms. Huong via email before arriving in Hanoi. She has arranged a lot of meetings for me and helped me as an interpreter when meeting a musician who speaks only Vietnamese. She has also worked as a chef. The Japan Foundation headhunted her when she worked at Goethe-Institut. A sharp and talented person. On top of that she fortunately has great knowledge of the local music scene and knows most of the musicians in it.

## November 10

One of the reasons why I visited Hanoi was that I wanted to meet a singer Ngọc Đại. I had read an interesting article about him contributed to a magazine by Eliza Lomas, the organizer of a venue in Hanoi called CAMA ATK, but the CDs he releases were available only in Vietnam (and, as I learned later, are barely available even there). Only a few songs were on the Internet. I heard, somehow, an influence of chanson in the style and tones of these songs, basically sung to his own piano accompaniment. A lingering of the French colonialism? At the same time, there was a dense air of “resistance” in the songs. I didn’t understand the Vietnamese lyrics, but the defiant tension was telling something certainly. I knew that he has been critical of the government censorship, but there must have been something more than that. I wanted to meet him and discover what it is.



Ngoc Dai

Ngoc Dai lives in a residential area in the north of the downtown, on the other side of the West Lake. In his simple single-story house built behind a building that appears to have been abandoned, what I see first is a mass of gigantic round-shaped loudspeakers and audio equipment piled up in the living room. He invites me to the table and offers strong green tea. In spite of the fact that he is almost 70, his appearance, behavior and voice are powerful. He often gets aggressive when keenly interested in the topic of the talk. Ngoc Dai, who studied at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music in the 70s and wrote classical pieces in his youth, became known in 2010, when he released an album of his band Đại Lâm Linh named after the last names of its central members. Đại

composed, and two female singers Lâm and Linh were featured. The band consisted of a piano, guitar, bass, percussions and some traditional instruments, and involved not only standard singing styles but also vivid and diverse “voices” including howls, groans and narrations. It was very experimental, but at the same time quite accessible and capable of gaining a certain degree of popularity. Indeed, sometimes they even appeared on the national television. Outstanding musical originality coexisted with universality that would have let their performance accepted immediately on another continent. However, unfortunately, Đại Lâm Linh didn’t go on so long. One singer got married and moved to Belgium, and the other got occupied with management of her own business, which led to the suspension of the band.

Ngoc Dai continued his activity as a solo artist. In 2013, he released *Thang Mo 1* that featured emotional and introvert songs with accompaniment on the piano and a viola. He questions the way the state has been in a song called *Days*:

“Layers of many questions / Incomprehensible questions / Questions frostbitten to the backbone / Ashamed questions that cannot raise its face / Questions of which hearts shed blood... / Nauseating / Monument / Of the history of the nation!” In *Ageratum*, he provokes the listeners: “Hello, ageratum / Coming out of mud / Dirty enough to be buried / Reticent and unable to open the petals / Pulled out and / Cannot open the skirt anymore... / Everybody, let’s have sex! / Everybody, let’s ejaculate! / Let’s chase the nation, the national borders! / Let’s be careless in bed, our nation! Everybody!” He laughs joyously and audaciously, “In my concert, the audience blushes and doesn’t know how to behave.” (The code of conduct is different from the West—one must not forget the fact that it is in Vietnam.)

To make a musical work public in this country, one has to submit it to the government for a censorship process. No freedom of expression at all. He didn’t expect *Thang Mo I* would pass the censorship, so he published it independently. As he expected, the album became an issue on the Communist Party’s newspaper due to the political objections and explicit sexual depictions in it, and the Party required him to discard the CDs and pay a large fine. For the *Thang Mo* project, he has already recorded 36 songs, which can produce four albums. I look forward to the next release, but it is said to be difficult in the current situation. He cannot even have a concert. Totally suspended. In spite of the difficult situation, he refuses to compromise and agitates, “Young artists only compromise with the forged liberalization of Vietnamese politics, speak only with permission, and never raise questions about the restriction of artistic expression. Is it OK to go on that way?”

## November 11

Vũ Nhật Tân and Ms. Huong take me to the home of Xuân Hoach, one of the Hanoi Masters. He uses string instruments such as đàn nguyệt and đàn bầu to play several types of music including formal and religious hát văn, xẩm (hát xẩm) folk songs, or chèo, satirical music theatre of farmers in Northern Vietnam. It is unique that he doesn’t only play instruments but has also worked hard on the restoration of old traditional instruments. The walls of his living room are covered with a number of instruments that he has made, photos that he has collected through his research into these instruments, and photos of his concerts. I heard the voice and music of Xuân Hoach for the first time last year in an album that a German label Glitterbeat released, *Hanoi Masters: War Is a Wound, Peace Is a Scar*, which was based on folk songs that are said to have been sung during the Vietnam War. He tells me that he would play at the front line to encourage soldiers during the war. After the war, he belonged to Vietnam National Music Song and Dance Theatre until recently. He plays some songs for us in the room, using a foot pedal to hit the percussion and picking the strings, which was an excellent performance. I had met a lot of musicians who play classical, traditional music, and even young artists often made reference to traditional music. I wanted to learn about the background of that (I also had other reasons to need to know about that though). Since I had listened to a lot of other musicians, the height of his artistry was obvious to me.



From the left, Vũ Nhật Tân, Xuân Hoach and Onda

## November 12

At the office of The Japan Foundation, I meet Tri Minh, a composer, pianist and electronics musician. He is also the organizer of an experimental music festival called Hanoi Sound Stuff Festival. Married to a Danish wife, he goes back and forth between Copenhagen and Hanoi, building knowledge about the Western scenes and bridging international and local artists. His music, which collages electronics and Vietnamese traditional instruments with exoteric piano melodies, is a kind of ambient music with oriental touch: it is understandable that he likes Ryuichi Sakamoto. However, sometimes, his music involves slight sarcasm. In his project *Songs of Heroes*, he uses materials that are related to the war: music that praises the state and songs that were used for communist propaganda. The intentionally cheap performance of these songs expresses a kind of irony. *The Sorrow of Noise*, on which he has been working for two years, exhibits the development of his idea. It was inspired by the novel *Sorrow of War* by Bảo Ninh, based on his experience as a soldier of the Vietnam War. Fragments of negative memories of the war and the state are abstracted and merged into electronic noise. “I was born in 1972. Even after the end of the war in 1975, another war with China went on and it continued until the 90s. I don’t work on these projects simply to raise an objection to wars, but it is natural to have wars as my themes because they were always present in my youth.”



Tri Minh

It is the last day in Hanoi. Tri Minh says he likes to introduce a terrific 17-year-old musician who meticulously manipulates electronics to me. I call her, but she is ill. I give up. I was able to meet four musicians who are central figures of the current scene, Kim Ngọc, Vũ Nhật Tân, Son X and Tri Minh, but didn't have enough time to meet younger artists. I tell myself that it is also good to have a reason to come back.

While being a socialist state, Vietnam started to liberate the market in 1986 with the Doi Moi Policy, and has recently been accelerating the internationalization and liberalization of the economy. People's lives have been exposed to capitalism and drastically changing. Does that mean that the world of art has been gaining the freedom of expression? "Very strict censorship has still been conducted in this country, but it is quite loose in comparison to ten or even five years ago. Now you aren't immediately sent to prison for doing what used to be enough reason for that. This liberalization is supported by the people, so it cannot be stopped."



## Yogyakarta

November 25, 2015

From Hong Kong via Jakarta, I arrive in Yogyakarta (commonly called Jogja). While I unpack, it's time for a Muslim prayer. I hear deep adhan voices calling from mosques all around. The gaps of their timings create an impression of echoes, and the sonic layers cover the whole city. How many mosques are there? Uncountable... I decided to visit Indonesia because the music scenes in the country seemed to be most exciting in Asia now. Couldn't we create a program with a focus on Indonesia in a few years? Besides, a biennale is on both in Jogja and Jakarta now, which must be a good opportunity for looking into the trend in contemporary art. Especially, Yayasan Biennale Yogyakarta has appointed Wok The Rock as curator. He is a producer who has long been leading the cutting-edge music scene of this city and the owner of an Internet label Yes No Wave. It was unpredictable what he was going to do.

Late at night, I sneak into a party at a trendy hotel, where I meet a noise musician Indra Hermawan also known as To Die, my pilot in this city who will connect me to a number of artists. The center of the building is hollowed out, and a pool is in the courtyard there. Young people flock around it. The party doesn't involve alcohol, since it is a Muslim country, which is the only big difference from a fashionable party in New York. Indra introduces me to people, and the people introduce me to others. I get acquainted with quite a number of artists in one hour. Wok is there too, and tells me, "Then, come to the venue of the Biennale." People speak English fluently, more than in other Asian countries that I have visited. The country consists of more than 13,000 islands. Although Indonesian is considered the official language, it is said that more than 500 languages exist in this country. It is understandable that Indonesians often need to communicate, even with Indonesians, in English.



Wok The Rock at Yayasan Biennale Yogyakarta

## November 26

I take a taxi to the Jogja National Museum, but the driver doesn't know the place. He says he has never even heard about it (taxis in Indonesia are not equipped with navigation system). How can a taxi driver not know the National Museum? He makes a lot of telephone calls and finds that out: although there is a sign that says it is the National Museum, the venues of the Biennale are a grungy ex-school building and a shabby improvised structure in the schoolyard. I speak to Wok, and he grins and replies, "It's just a rented space. It's a joke that it's the National Museum." I had heard that infrastructure has not been developed, subsidy is very little and everything is done in a do-it-yourself style in this country, but it was even more surprising to actually see how they manage in that environment.

Since Wok is the curator, this biennale shows a lot of performances. Wukir Suryadi, a member of Senyawa and an instrument maker/player, presents a performance. In a corner of the space, his original instruments made through recycling the abandoned artworks of other artists are exhibited. Instead of him, young musicians who have formally studied Western music play them. There are three instruments. One is a grotesque sculpture of a monster without a head, on which five strings are attached. Another is a red tin cylinder into which a lot of nails are hit. One can pick the nails or blow a mouthpiece on a tube sticking out of the cylinder. The other is a box on a stand, into which an iron bar is roughly

thrust. One flips the bar to produce sound. Both visually and sonically, they are more like "noise machines" than "instruments." Wukir has composed a piece for this; it offers a simple structure and instructions, which the musicians seriously follow. The contrast between the formal attitude of the players and the rough sound produced by the dadaistically broken instruments is humorous.



Rully Shabara

The only condition for taking part in the improvisation is participation in a simple workshop in advance. There are around 30 performers today. They are divided into several groups, and the leader of each group (= political party) provides their members with a piece of paper on which voicing vocabularies are explained. They are the scores. Rully conceives the structure there, and as the conductor, he tells the players how to make sound with which type of voice by gestures. It feels like the spontaneous composition in Butch Morris' "Conduction" with the dynamics of John Zorn's "Cobra," but the way he conducts is closer to that of Otomo Yoshihide in his collective improvisation project (also the ways they use hand signals are similar). I have seen this methodology often since the 90s, but seeing it in Indonesia feels new (there should be different possibilities in it, when employed in Asia, even if it appears to be out of fashion in the West). The reactions of the participants are lively. I feel good both seeing and taking part in it. Most of the vocabularies used in it are onomatopoeias, which explore sonic attraction, but there are also some words that have meanings. When we pronounce an Indonesian word that means "shit," audience burst into laughter. Rully says, "I'm most interested in these kinds of participatory projects for a community recently."

## November 27

On a stage situated in the backyard of a gallery, a band called Pribumi that features a poet Handoyo Purwowijoyo perform. A simple ensemble of a voice, guitar and drums in a punkish free form, which reminds me of the no wave music in New York in the 80s. An Indonesian DNA? It is said that Handoyo, the vocalist, suffered a mental illness and didn't talk with anyone from 2001 to 2008 but has recovered. He wears a white shirt and looks like an office worker, which makes him absolutely conspicuous among the members who wear typical rock band clothes. His "poetry reading" sounds like moaning or a mantra, which deviates from



Pribumi

the sound of the guitar and rhythm of the drums as much as his appearance. I heard that the lyrics are also quite crazy... By the way, the guitarist of the band, Soni Irawan, formed a band Seek Sick Six in 1999 with Jimmy Yoanda Mahardhika. They say that they copied Sonic Youth in the first gig, but since the second gig, they have developed their own style absorbing influences from Krautrock bands such as Can and Faust. Yes No Wave has released several albums of theirs. They are available online. They belong to the first generation of the alternative music scene of Jogja; in other words, they are one of the initiators.

### **November 28**

Spend the afternoon lazily, together with Rully of Senyawa and Rabih Beaini, the owner of Morphine Records that has produced their albums. Lunch, and then massage...

I should remind myself of how I got to know Senyawa. I saw them on Vincent Moon's film three or four years ago. Rully Shabara performed emotionally with extensive vocal techniques, and Wukir Suryadi played "bamboo spear," an instrument he made of bamboo and iron strings (it can either be a percussion or string instrument), in plural locations in the city of Jogja in front of local people who happened to be there. Their performance displayed incomparable originality, successfully joining the native quality of traditional music and logical consistency of Western music. What is this? What's been happening recently in music scenes hasn't frequently surprised me, but this was a shock. It must not have been only me who was shocked. Indeed, in few years, they became one of the few Asian groups that are internationally active in the field of experimental music.

In 2010, introduced by Wok The Rock with Yes No Wave, Rully, who is from Sulawesi Island and has lived in Jogja for a long time, met Wukir, who is from Malang, and had an improvised session at Yes No Club. They hit it off, started to record an album immediately, and it was done in four days (the result is available on Yes No Wave). In few months, Kristi Monfries, who is their current manager, brought them to Melbourne Jazz Festival, which marked their international debut. Since then, they have been playing constantly in Europe, Japan and other parts of the world (a U.S. tour in summer 2016 has been planned). This might sound like an idealized success story (actually, they say that they never would have imagined this would happen). However, what is surprising is not the career but the unique musical quality. The word "senyawa" means "chemical compound." It refers not only to chemical compound between "Rully and Wukir" but also, as expressed often in their lyrics, "nature and human," as well as "traditional and experimental music." The director of Asian Meeting Festival, dj sniff, once told me about similarity between a Javanese traditional dance "jathilan" and Senyawa's music (he has been traveling in Asia for research as I do, for AMF, so we have been exchanging information). Jathilan is a ritual in Javanese village festivals, where dancers enter trance and that can last for a whole day. Rully laughs and says, "We are often inspired by these traditional rituals, but we don't imitate them. We draw on their spirit, because it's technically impossible for us to play traditional music at all."

This sudden leap from the traditional to contemporary might be found in many other Indonesian musical activities as well. This country had maintained traditional cultures and lifestyles, but the economic growth and the infiltration of foreign contemporary cultures in the recent ten and some years have drastically changed the situation. The result is the absence of "modernity," which was skipped. I acutely feel the difference of the context, on which the cultures have developed, from the West, meeting a number of artists everyday since arriving in Jogja. The difference is explicit in an artist's work and implicit in another, but it is important to remember the fact that things cannot be very efficiently explained in the Western critical language. How can we convey the reality accurately to our audience? In the future programs for TPAM, it is probably necessary to not only present performances but also involve researchers and curators and have them thoroughly explain, in words, the "difference" and situation in order to promote understanding of the background from which these musical activities have emerged.

### **November 29**

Meet Marzuki with Jogja Hip Hop Foundation. He comes to my hotel on a gorgeous Land Cruiser, and takes me to a bar in the neighborhood for beer. He is now a national star, who appears on the cover of the Indonesian Rolling Stone, tours in the U.S. as a national guest, associates with the current President, and joins a rally in a gigantic stadium to rap in front of tens of thousands of audience. He shows me photos on his iPhone, which are like medals of honors. However, he also dislikes the celebrity lifestyle and resides in a village near Jogja where he was born and has lived a steady life. "My parents were farmers, so the rhythm of their life is still in my body." The gap and quick turns between the conspicuousness and modesty within him is interesting.

Marzuki, as the leader of Jogja Hip Hop Foundation, has contributed to the development of the cultural scenes in this

city for more than a decade. I tell him that I met people of Teater Garasi today, and he says, “They are good. I used to work with them.” In this city, visual arts, dance, music, theatre and everything else are loosely associated, where artists can move across the scenes freely and take genre-crossing and interdisciplinary approaches without difficulty. Taking full advantage of the environment and his own experience in other fields (at first, he was also a visual artist), Marzuki’s work displays his talent as a producer who coordinates the whole, from artwork and stage design to building of the group’s public image, and an excellent business sense. It is impossible to see him simply as a rapper.

Their music is one of the good practices of adapting hip-hop, the most globally active musical form, to the Indonesian environment. It is excellent both in the use of language and quality of production. Also, the way they take apparently traditional elements in is cool. His thought about that is smart: “It gets dishonest if you forcefully merge traditional music into it. I don’t intend too much. You can hear that kind of music endlessly on radio, and it’s in the daily life. I just let it spontaneously come into my music.”

### **November 30**

In Jogja, I noticed that Indonesian young people are good at using social media. They upload tracks and clips onto the Internet, and promote them using Facebook and cellphone apps. They relentlessly disseminate things. I hear that even poor people invest a lot in iPhone and those gadgets. Satya Prapanca, whose nickname is Panca, runs a video production called Kebun Binatang Film together with Rully Shabara. They keep shooting documentaries of the music scenes in Jogja and uploading them onto YouTube. “I borrowed my father’s Canon camera without his permission and started to shoot. I found it interesting and became intent on it. I still use that cheap camera, and Rully edits what I shoot.” But the camerawork is quite good. Not only featuring music as the central element like MTV does, they are also good at depiction of situations and storytelling through images.

Watching all their clips one by one, the folk band Rabu drew my attention. Wednes Mandra is a 23-year-old student who lives in a pastoral village in a suburb of Jogja. “I used to do noise. I was deeply involved in the scene. But something was wrong. So I started to play the guitar and sing. I felt liberated, though my old noise colleagues backbit me a lot labeling me as an apostate.” He formed Rabu with Judha Herdanta, who plays an acoustic guitar too. He says they are influenced by Iwan Fals, an Indonesian folk singer, but they have established their own dreamy and dark style. “My parents didn’t like my noise music, but it seems they like what I do now,” he laughs.

I ran into Fikri MS in the party that I attended on the day I arrived in Jogja. He is from Maura Enim in the south of Sumatra, and has been in this city for months to train himself in an unfamiliar environment. He told me, “I can play plants,” and I didn’t get it. I invited him to my hotel and had him explain and show his equipment in a cafe beside the lobby. Waitresses wondered what we were doing and cast attentive gazes on us. In his project called *ARTMOSF: Dark Noise Ambient (DNA)*, he explores sound with the notion of “nature” as its base. A set of handmade electronic gears made of wood, bamboo and iron was in his suitcase, which he hit or rubbed with a bow. He thrust the antenna of a theremin into the soil in a plant pot and connected it to the system. Then, by touching the leaves and branches of the plant, the static electricity generated between the player’s hand and the plant controlled the sound. It sensitively reacted to the movement of the body and changes in the surrounding environment. I finally understood that his notion of “nature” was about the organic system of life itself. The sound it produced was profound, and couldn’t be easily categorized as noise or ambient. He has worked as a musician for a theatre troupe, and is in a process of becoming independent as an artist.

I look forward to the future development of these two young artists. There are many talented artists in Jogja. (I can’t mention everyone here... Also in the field of intermedia, there are excellent artists who have already been internationally active such as Lifepatch and Venzha Christ...) It is not surprising that Jogja is known as the biggest artistic city in Indonesia. However, Panca told me something interesting: “They say Jogja is a city of art, but I don’t buy it. There is no decent art center, no money, and no support for artists in comparison to Jakarta and Bangung. We have to do everything on our own.” It is said that even Senyawa, although they have been that internationally active, have never received support from a public institution of this country. Hmmm. Is it that the wild environment produces strong artists?



## Bandung

December 2, 2015

Arrived in Bandung, in the west of Java, last night and took a walk in the morning. Compared to the energetic chaos of Jogja, I find the town somehow European or orderly. Because the city had flourished as the center of politics, economy and culture since the 18th century throughout the Netherlands' colonialism, I find a good amount of architecture in the styles from that time. Mohamad Haikal Azizi, a guitarist and one of the important young artists in the Indonesian alternative scene, drives me to some galleries. We visit Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, a decent art center on a hill around the central area of the city that introduces contemporary art, and then Salian Art, a beautiful gallery in the greens on another hill across the city...

Haikal Azizi works on a project of guitar improvisation under his alias Bin Idris. More than ten musicians from Asian countries improvised on a simple structure in Asian Meeting Festival in Tokyo last year, and I found his performance most idiosyncratic and outstanding. He plays an acoustic guitar ignoring shared idioms of improvisation, but his groove is so sharp and his melodies are so creative. It was also interesting that he was unpredictable: he sometimes added irrelevant humming or waited doing nothing. His unique and meditative worldview was expressed through frequent use of loops. I feature his solo performance in TPAM 2016.



Duto Hardono at ITB

I meet a sound artist Duto Hardono and go to a cafe. He is known for installations and performances employing analog equipment such as an open reel tape recorder and turntable, which are often presented in other Asian countries. He uses the instability and unpredictable lags of a tape recorder, which is not designed as an “instrument” (it is impossible to play it accurately... I know that very well because I use it as an instrument...), to indicate the uncertainty of unknown domains. In his *Popular Critics*, shown in Tokyo in 2011, he made a hoop of a long tape and looped the one side of it on the recording head and reel of a recorder that was placed sideways and the other side on the neck of a Japanese manekineko (beckoning cat) porcelain figure. Seven or eight art magazines were

piled under the recorder, and audience’s cheers, laughter and applauses were on the tape. This work ridicules success stories in an “art market,” with the magazines as the symbol of a success. In *C.C. Records*, an installation presented in Jogja Biennale, he offered seven-inch EP records of Indonesian music that were cut in half, and audience freely combined two of them and played it on a turntable. The needle scratched two different records and produced a cut-up locked groove. “Music” transformed into an uncanny sonic entity (it is a work in the line of Marclay and Mirza).

I visit ITB (Institute of Technology, Bandung), a university where Hardono teaches. The art department of ITB has produced a number of artists for a long time. It is said that many students study new media recently. The ideas that the artists I met in Bandung have and their works are slightly closer to the Western contexts, perhaps because of the education. The university has been being renovated, so students are working on their stuff in debris as if they had been bombarded, and classes are held in the middle of the sounds of drills and hammers.

At local Sundanese dinner, I talk with a young man Bob Edrian Triadi who studies Indonesian sound art. It started from the employment of sound by Heri Dono, who appeared in the international scene with his works inspired by wayang, the Indonesian shadow puppetry, as well as installation artists of the next generation Tintin Wulia and Jompet Kuswidananto. That divided into the new media art such as Venzha Christ and his House of Natural Fiber (HONF) and sound art including Duto Hardono and Etza Meisyara... He explains how visual arts, new media and sound art evolved around the notion of “sound.” It is not simple because influences from abroad interfere in each stage of the evolution, but his mapping is clear. I try to understand how the field of “sound art,” which has not developed yet in Asian countries, has been recognized here.

December 4

I saw Karinding Attack for the first time also in Vincent Moon’s film. Their main instrument is karinding, a traditional instrument made of bamboo (it is played between the lips like a Jew’s harp), and all the other wind instruments and

percussions of the group consisting of more than ten members are also made of bamboo. With narrations with suppressed emotions over the sounds, their ritual around a bonfire in the woods emitted ominous aura, which was far from the prevalent image of traditional music. That is explained by the fact that most of the members are metalheads, who play death metal usually. There are members of punk bands too.

I talk with Man and Okid, the leaders of the band, at a cafe in the town. "We had always been wondering what our own culture would be since the 90s, playing death metal. We started to play only karinding and bamboo instruments in 2009. Angklung (melodic percussions made of bamboo) was popular, but karinding wasn't. The impact was fantastic. Even children play it now at public schools." The forgotten instrument suddenly became widespread because of the band, and it is even said that almost 100 copy bands emerged. "A karinding festival was held in Bandung last week. About 20 bands played in it." Man also organizes karinding workshop regularly, and they have built a kind of community. As seen in the video clips available online, they collaborate with different artists including popular singers, and even appear on television. Musically it is a kind of doom metal in their own fashion with cult imagery, so it is interesting that they have gained that much popularity.

At night I meet Ucok, who led a hip-hop group Homicide from 1994 to 2007, at a punk concert venue. He was the MC called Morgue Vanguard. Delivering extremely leftist political messages that explicitly criticized capitalism and corruption on dark beats like Cypress Hill (some find influence from Techno Animal), he completely detached himself from the mainstream and stayed underground. "The hardest time in my life was when I criticized Islamic fundamentalists. I received a lot of harassments and thought I would be killed." He was so radical that he didn't hesitate to feature religious issues, which tend to be considered a taboo in Indonesia (by the way, in Indonesia, one is required to choose from four selected religions, and it is printed on their ID). He has currently been working on a solo album, but he is too busy to complete it, organizing local concerts and working as an illustrator. He is an important figure who supports the underground scene of Bandung. He gives me a CD, a collaboration with still, who was a DJ of dälek, based in New Jersey. It can be said to be an extension of Homicide, but is an excellent album with improved rapping and tracks. Incidentally, the punk concert was quite normally punkish, but the audience was a mixture of metalheads, punks and B-Boys. An inconceivable situation in the West, but he tells me that is normal in Bandung. That reminds me of the situation in Jogja, where artists freely move across different fields.

## Jakarta

**December 5, 2015**

I take a train from Bandung to Jakarta. As soon as I enter the city, the scale overwhelms me. An endless forest of modern buildings (reminds me of Tokyo...). I take a taxi at the station, and the driver tells me that the meter is jammed. I guess he intends to overcharge (this never happened in Jogja and Bandung: people were relaxed and generous...). It seems that the urban development has been accelerated: buildings are being built everywhere. Trapped in the infamous traffic jam of this city, it takes more than one hour to the hotel that is not so far from the station.

Visit Goethe-Institut, where a music festival called RRRec Fest is held. Except Stylish Nonsense from Thailand and Otomo Yoshihide from Japan, the artists are all Indonesian. Bin Idris and Duto Hardono, whom I met in Bandung, are in them. The venue is a decent concert hall of which capacity seems to be around 300. The collective that organizes this festival uses a different venue every time (last year, it was held in the woods...). It is not easy to invite artists from abroad here, due to the shortage of public support, but they are good at finding international partners.

Otomo Yoshihide performs a unruffled guitar solo. His trademark feedback creates overtones that exceeds the audible frequency range, shaking the lamps hung from the ceiling and equipment in the room. Duto Hardono improvises together with another electronic musician. The dynamic range of his sounds is very wide and the improvisation is quite responsive, in spite of the fact that his vocabulary is limited because he uses only a tape recorder and foot pedal. However, the biggest surprise is Stylish Nonsense. It is a unit formed in 1998 by POK (Wannarit Pongprayoon) and JUNE (Yuttana Kalambaheti) that has been around for a long time in the underground scene of Bangkok. POK plays a mobile keyboard to



Man and Okid, members of Karinding Attack

which an arm is attached, and JUNE plays pads and drums that are connected to a sampler. They fiddle with the sequences and riffs of their synthesizers, playfully improvising rhythms. Their style reminds of Japanese subculture, and the atmosphere is somehow similar to that of Buffalo Daughter, but the difference is in that the tension of their performance derives from their unconstrained flexibility and unpredictable improvisation. On top of that, what makes this band totally different from others is their performativity. The two artists wear skirts and walk across the stage energetically. Their actions are aggressive. They throw themselves at the drums and destroy them, which marks the end of the performance. Half music, half spectacle. Musicians tend to focus too much on sound to be capable of having awareness about visual expression, but they involve visual elements in their own way that is neither dance nor theatre.

## December 7

Attend Jakarta Biennale held in a specially designed venue in Panchoran, the south of Jakarta. The venue is a storage that used to be a department store, and I am boiled there because the space is not air-conditioned. Only the room where video works are exhibited is air-conditioned, because it has to be shut up, so I stay there occasionally. The theme is “Neither Back nor Forward: Acting in the Present.” No nostalgia, no utopianism. Most of the works are installations by about 70 Indonesian and international artists that tackle all the social issues: environmental pollution, depletion of resources, poverty, civil war, sexual discrimination and so on. The chief curator is Charles Esche, the director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and he selected the works together with six Indonesian curators. It is not difficult to find a social issue in Indonesia; the resource is rich. Both international and Indonesian works reflect the situation of this country somehow and convey the air of the reality that I have become familiar with. Lifepatch, the artist collective in Jogja that I have mentioned above, worked on the issue of water resource. They infiltrated into a community in Surabaya, where filtered, drinkable water is barely available, and installed a filtering machine there. And then they developed the installation from the video recording of what they did there. Maika Elan, a photographer from Hanoi, exhibited portraits of homosexual and transgender couples that he had collected since 2010. Same-sex marriage became legal in Vietnam in 2015: did his project foresee that, or was that a synchronicity? (It was surprising that the first to recognize it in Asia was the socialist country...)



An exhibition space at Jakarta Biennale

In terms of involvement of music, the installation by Melawan Kebisingan Kota, a collective from Surabaya, was interesting. The name of the collective means “fighting noises of the city,” and they have delivered noise performances and workshop in public spaces in the city (probably that was also because there isn’t a suitable venue for them...). This installation is about picking up in the street and purchasing at flea markets all kinds of junks that are usable for making sounds, in Jakarta, to make a gigantic “instrument.” Jakarta is said to be one of the worst ten traffic jam cities in the world, so noise is a big issue. The busy construction has made it worse. This work exposed the urban issue visually and sonically.

I should mention “noise” in this country here. I saw a film directed by Adyhtia Utama and Riar Rizaldi from Jakarta. It is said that it was shot during a period from 2009 to 2010, and since the premiere in 2014, the film has been circulating around European and Japanese festivals. It is an important documentary, since Indonesia is said to be the place where noise music is most active in Asia, that recorded live performances and interviews of musicians who work in such cities as Jogja, Bandung and Jakarta. The film did not only tell the stories about the rises and falls of the scenes but also about problems such as their isolation in the conservative society or difficulty of making their living as musicians, which conveyed a sense of blockage and impasse. I was interested, so met some artists who appeared in the film and looked into their recordings. However, I wasn’t really convinced. I had seen countless performances by good noise artists in Japan and the U.S. since the 80s. Masami Akita, Hijokaidan, Masonna, Wolf



Installation by Melawan Kebisingan Kota

Eyes, Kevin Drumm, and many, many others. Compared to them, I didn't find artistry and originality in the Indonesian noise. There is an impact, but why is it not convincing enough? I asked Riar Rizaldi, a co-director of the film, this question. He replied: "To be frank, I thought the same thing. As a social phenomenon, the kind of Jogja Noise Bombing or any other noise movement in Indonesia is really interesting because of their background (isolation, politics, anger, etc, etc). But I find their performances somehow lacking of any context or ideas. I got the sense that most of these noise performances were trying to push the limit of intensity, and were quite transgressive for Indonesian society (I used to do the same thing with my previous band as well), but they hardly do anything to conceptualize their work. It is merely for the sake of intensity, thus make it most of the performance just look and sound the same. In my humble opinion, I find that most of the Indonesian noise artists are easily satisfied with their result. Most of them are not really interested in experimenting, once they got their setup and it sounds loud they are happy with it and it makes them less excited to find their own characters. But then again I could totally understand this phenomena, I thought the culture of putting much effort and passion on art or music is not really a necessary thing for them. It is rooted in the basic economy and social problem in Indonesia. They have their daily jobs for living, which might be pressing their passion, and in the weekend whenever they can blast the loud noise, they are happy with it." That makes sense. Then, probably I should pay attention to what remains after going through "noise," or perhaps, what will be finally accomplished in their discipline toward the extreme. I find artists such as Melawan Kebisingan Kota, who transferred their approach to the context of contemporary art to objectively examine what they do, or Rabu, who discovered a totally different approach, more eloquent. Riar Rizaldi, building on his experience as a noise musician, has been studying expanded cinema in the U.K. and working on performance that transfers noise into video image. These experimentations should open up new fields. There should be plenty of possibilities.

The last day of this research in Indonesia. I just hastily went around the three cities, but that was enough for me to find out that the quality and amount of artists' activities are beyond my expectation and much more advanced than in other Asian countries. In addition, the walls between different fields (between different types of music or between music and other genres) are very low, so it is credible enough to believe that an artist can take in different ideas, look at their own activity from a different angle, and expand it in the future. The current issues and difficulties do not restrain me from believing that a number of exciting artists will emerge from this country.