

Wordless art performance cries out for justice

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Lapindo

victims: Volunteers who took part in Dadang Christanto's Art Performance in Solidarity with the victims of the Lapindo mudflow disaster, stand for two hours covered in mud. *JP/Cynthia Webb*

In a regional art gallery in the northern New South Wales town of Lismore, about 30 volunteers of varying ages covered themselves, and their clothes, with white potters' clay. They received instructions from a quietly spoken Indonesian man, who explained what they would be doing for the following two hours.

Dadang Christanto, a leading contemporary artist from Indonesia, told them they were doing this Art Performance in solidarity with the people of the Sidoarjo area who have lost so much in the tragedy of the mudslide. According to most expert opinions, the mudslide has been unleashed by human error in drilling practice, as the PT Lapindo Brantas company drilled a gas well. The other explanation put forward by the company is that it was related to instability underground, related to the Yogyakarta earthquake of 27 May 2006, whose epicenter was 300 kilometers away from the location. The mud flow began two days later. A definitive decision has yet to be reached, and in the meantime, thousands of dispossessed people wait, and wait.

The Australians, along with Dadang, then stood silently for two hours, moving very little, or not at all, holding photographs of Indonesian people whom they did not even know. It was a

cold mid-winter's day, and most of them were shaking and their teeth chattering by the end of the vigil.

Not many people in Australia know anything about the LUSI (a contraction from Lumpur-Sidoarjo) situation in East Java, but now Dadang Christanto is touring this Art Performance to six regional galleries in three Australian states, so people are learning about it.

In this part of New South Wales, it strikes a chord as there are a lot of protests going on. Local people are worried about the practice of "fracking" which is used by mining companies searching for coal seam gas. "Fracking" has a reputation for polluting underground water reservoirs, and causing unpredictable releases of dangerous flammable gases.

This was the sixth time that Dadang Christanto has gathered people together to do this Art Performance. The first occasion was at Tugu Proklamasi in Jakarta, back in 2008, when the vigil was maintained from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m. with around six hundred participants.

Dadang Christanto divides his time between Indonesia and Brisbane, QLD and currently works as a full-time professional artist. He currently has an exhibition in Yuz Museum, Darmawangsa Square, Jakarta, which will be on show until Aug. 24.

"This is a very serious issue in Indonesia. I think that it is part of a corrupt state that the people have had to suffer for so long. It's all delayed by official red tape, but people's suffering is not 'official'. It's real. In Indonesia, there is a lot of talk about religion rather than this issue. There is no balance," Dadang said.

His plea to the government: "Please don't allow this to ever happen again. There is a high human cost and a high cost to the environment."

On Aburizal Bakrie's presidential ambitions, Dadang only said, "It is difficult for him because he has left many problems at Sidoarjo." However, on a recent radio interview with ABC Radio National here in Australia, Bakrie said that this is not a problem, as the company's activities are entirely separate from him as an individual.

Dadang's past art history shows that he is very upset about injustice, however, as a Javanese born fifty-five years ago in Tegal, he is reluctant to speak too strongly. Rather, he lets his artwork speak for him.

During the time of the New Order government, his work had a strong element of protest. During the prestigious Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1999, his work was a strong protest piece. It was entitled For Those Who Have

Been Killed and was acquired by the Gallery. The back-story is that when Dadang was an 8-year-old child, his father was falsely accused of communist sympathies, and was taken away from the family home, never to be seen again. Dadang also submitted another piece called The Fire of May, which he stated was demonstrating anti-violence, and referred to the events of May 1998 in Jakarta.

Dadang said that the inspiration for this art performance — a group of people holding a silent, standing vigil, comes from the Javanese tradition of pepe, which he said means sun-baking. In times gone by, if people wished to express a grievance to the Sultan, they would just stand in the sun in front of the Kraton, until the Sultan emerged to hear them. They would wait there, for as long as was necessary.

Dadang is married to Nana, and has two children, a son, Gunung, aged eighteen, born in Indonesia, and a daughter Embun, aged thirteen, who was born in Australia. He first brought the family to Australia in February, 1999 when he took a position teaching South East Asian Contemporary Art at Charles Darwin University, in Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia.

Ms Elen James, a member of the public who came to witness the performance, said “The participants were showing such respect, and they stood there, not only for the people of Indonesia, but for people all over the world, who are the victims of tragedy and injustice.”

Rebecca Kingsley, one of the volunteers, said “Putting on the mud was quite good fun, but then, I was very surprised by how I was hit by outrage about what had happened. I felt kind of ‘mad’ [angry] about short-term views, where governments and companies do things that affect the lives of people. I chose a picture of an old woman, feeling it was so tragic that she should have to endure such a thing, at this stage in her life. Then I was overcome by helplessness and sadness.”

When their cold, wet, clay covered clothes were removed, they were thrown around on the floor of the alcove in the gallery, and left where they fell. They will remain there for a month, recalling the event until Aug. 20. There will be video screenings and photographs of the art performance on the walls, and visitors to the Gallery will be able to explore the story of the disaster, and the sadness of those who wait for their compensation, and for people in high places to care about them.

Although the actual art performance lasted only two hours, the suffering of people around the world continues indefinitely, in places where events flood and overcome the powerless, in the way that the mudslide has done in Sidoarjo, East Java.