

# Curators in Conversation

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, three curators talk about the future of art, their daily lives and creative projects during the large-scale social distancing

By Deborah Iskandar

## SADIAH BOONSTRA

is a curator and historian based in Jakarta. She is an Asia Scholar at Melbourne University and was curator of public programmes at Asia TOPA (Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts 2020) in Melbourne earlier this year. Previously, she was Senior Manager Programs at the National Gallery Singapore.

*Deborah Carr Iskandar: Did you experience any stay-at-home period overseas?*

Sadiah Boonstra: I was in Australia for Asia TOPA when the pandemic hit, so I rushed back to Indonesia and arrived right before the border closed.

*DCI: You are known for a voracious appetite for literature works; have you read anything new?*

SB: I have been reading the works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer besides some academic reading and history books. My current favourites include a book by Susie Protschky about photography, another on the representation of

the Royal Dutch family in photo albums, as well as another book on wayang representation on the television and other media.

*DCI: I saw your recent virtual gallery tour for Framer Framed exhibition, "On the Nature of Botanical Gardens", which is an exhibition that includes Sinta Tantra and Arahmaiani. What do you think are the roles of these virtual tours in bridging art to the currently socially-distanced public?*

SB: We decided to do it after the government imposed on the lockdown and exhibitions have to be closed, and made two tours accessible in both English and Dutch. We wanted to allow people to visit virtually because there would be a good continuation between the virtual tour and the actual exhibition after the lockdown is relaxed.

*DCI: Related to your exhibition theme, I feel like there is an increase in politically-aware environmental movements and sentiments,*

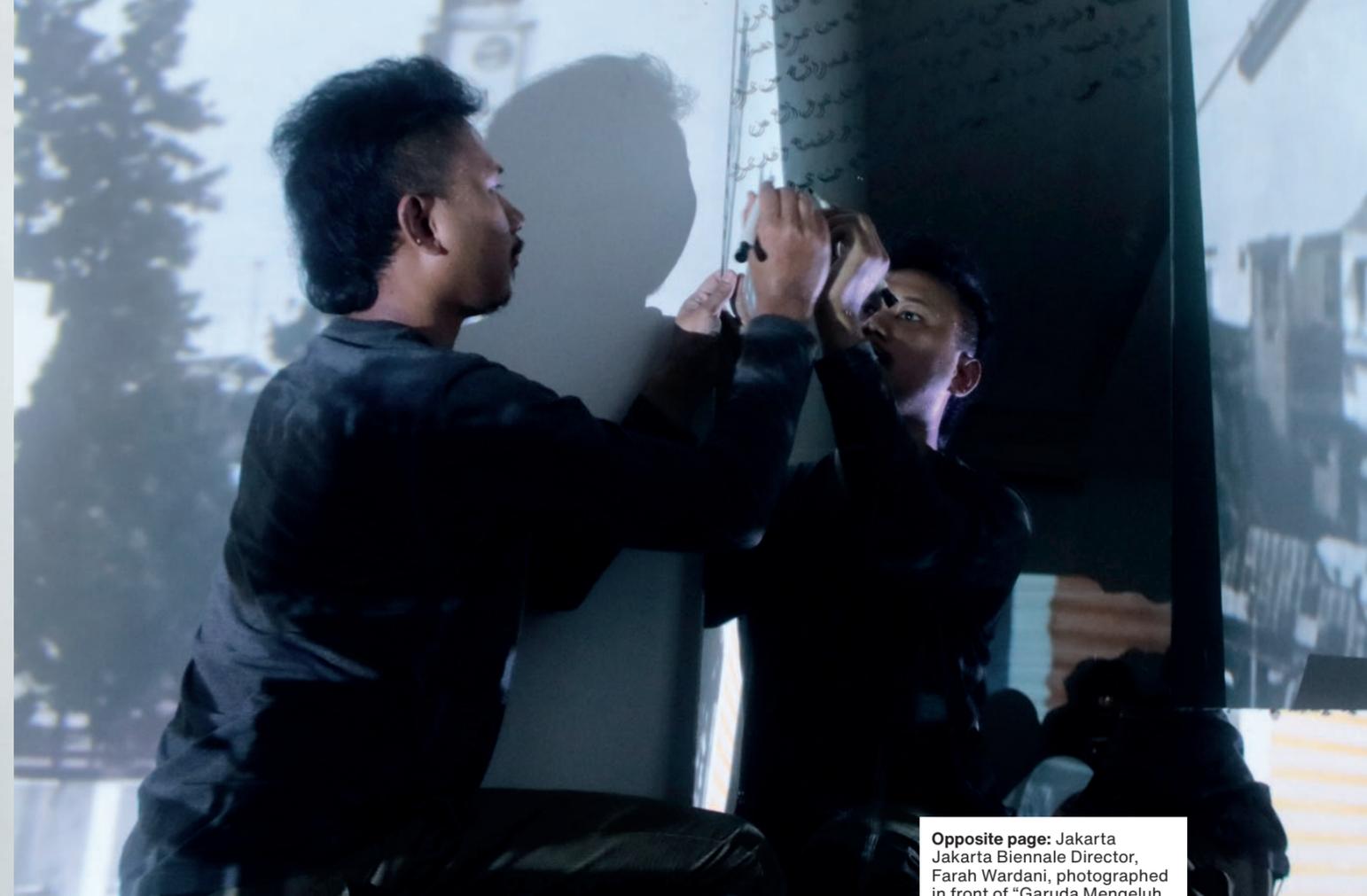
*especially during the pandemic. How do you view Arahmaiani's gardening-activism initiatives and art-activism works in this context?*  
SB: I felt like the whole exhibition came quite timely because it has a lot of connection to current issues such as Black Lives Matter, colonialism and social hierarchy, and how all these issues are very much affecting lives today. Moreover, many of the featured artists created works based on local knowledge that has always existed, like Arahmaiani's work "Memory of Nature". Such knowledge might well be a way to survive in the future.

*DCI: On a lighter note, do you indulge in any gardening at home these past months?*  
SB: Yes, I have set up a vegetable garden at home and planted basil, water spinach, melon, papayas and chillies, and it is going well! The chives are especially growing fast.

*DCI: With the "new normal" period starting, what do you think would be the next step for us in reopening back the art scene?*  
SB: I think there will be a cultural change in the art world because our pace used to be fast with a lot of travelling involved that is so damaging to the natural environment. Today, there are so many new art initiatives explored online. Many art fairs and biennales have been cancelled, if not postponed altogether, which makes me wonder if this would cast a longer-lasting impact with the scale of everything being affected. Overall, I think the art world has not stopped working through Covid-19 pandemic, and we will find a way to recover.



ISA Art & Design Principle Deborah Carr Iskandar (left) with scholar-curator Sadiah Boonstra (right) posing in front of Etza Meisyara's painting titled "Garam di Laut, Asam di Gunung, Bertemu Dalam Belanga #1" (2019)



**Opposite page:** Jakarta Jakarta Biennale Director, Farah Wardani, photographed in front of "Garuda Mengeluh kepada Zorro" (2002)  
**This page:** Riyadhus Shalihin performing "The Iron Sea" (2020) at Forum Lenteng

## FARAH WARDANI

is a curator, art historian and archivist, and was the executive director of Indonesian Visual Art Archive, the first digital archive centre for art in Indonesia. She also worked with National Gallery Singapore as an Assistant Director for the Research Centre, and currently is the director for the upcoming Jakarta Biennale 2021.

**DCI:** How have you spent your time during this large-scale social distancing period? Did you do anything new or different?

**FW:** I work from home these days, and do enjoy it, but there is a difference between having an office at home and not being allowed to go out and meet people at all, which is the unpleasant part. However, I still keep myself occupied with other art projects and the Jakarta Biennale. With the Biennale moving to 2021, there is still ample of time to do more careful preparation for all the exhibitions.

**DCI:** With the postponement of Jakarta Biennale, its theme "Esok" (Tomorrow) feels all the more timely and fitting. Is it intentional?

**FW:** Well, we can only postpone the Jakarta Biennale until tomorrow, but we have already decided the title "Esok" since last year. The Jakarta Biennale has always been about how the art ecosystem can contribute and talk about the world and contemporary global issues that are relevant to our lives. That is why we come up with "Esok", to talk about the future state of the art world. Covid-19 then happened, which adds more urgency to the topic since tomorrow might never come. (laughs) We feel like it is a momentous feeling, doing the Biennale with an additional stressor to talk about how it would turn out. I and the other curators, however, believe that this is a meaningful fight for the exhibition and the whole art scene. Wish us luck!

**DCI:** Based on your perspective as a curator, do you think there will be a new way of curating that will arise from the combination of the increase in domesticity, and lack of public interaction brought about by the current world situation?

**FW:** Yes, and we are developing something special that I cannot spill the beans yet. People talk about art and activism, in which art activism brings about social change. However, the one we are working on with Dolorosa Sinaga, whom I intimately call mbak Dolo, leans more towards curatorial activism with a team of all-female curators.

**DCI:** This brings to attention that the word "curating" has its root words in "to cure" and "to care"; is it not?

**FW:** Yes. Mbak Dolo also believes that art should do good and provide a solution to goodness to humanity. I think that is the activism side of curatorial activism, which is why we try to solve or contribute to this urgency we are now dealing with.

Photography by Deni Supriyanto

## RIYADHUS SHALIHIN

is a dramaturge, playwright, theatre-maker, and video and performance artist known for prolific works in many art events and performance festivals. He is the founder and artistic director of the Bandung Performing Arts Forum. Riyadhus is the curator for ISA Art & Design recent online exhibition, "Corporeal/Material: On Performance Art and Photography."

**DCI:** With ISA Art & Design's recent show, how does the curation process of an online show differ from your usual curating practice?

**RS:** It is much easier to curate digitally compared to curating a physical exhibition! We are not commissioning new works from zero but instead showcasing archives and finished artworks. Meanwhile, in the physical art exhibition, especially if we are commissioning new works, then we will have more intensive work to do; at the same time, that is the thrill of creating a full-scale

art exhibition with many exciting works to be revealed to the public under a unified theme.

**ISA:** The last time we met in person was at Claudia Bosse's performance, which I think was the tail end of normalcy in Indonesia.

**RS:** Yes, it was the end of art as we know it and the end of normalcy. Shortly after that, everything went down. At the same time, it is indeed very cool because Claudia Bosse's theme was about the apocalyptic future, and with everything happening, it feels as if that the apocalypse did come. If the current situation is just one layer of apocalypse, try to imagine the full scale!

**ISA:** Do you think people are assigning more meaning to domestic activities during this period? How so?

**RS:** Yes, very much so! That is why I made a zine about lives at home, *Sandiwara*, because I feel that it is fitting to research about

houses and the meaning of "home" when everyone is in a domestic condition during the pandemic. I also became curious and started to look at some works of literature that talks about the meaning and relation between art and home.

**ISA:** Did you read anything new or discovered any noteworthy online art initiative?

**RS:** I followed some free lectures from Richard Schechner at the New York University. Alia Swastika made a series of zoom meetings about sculpture, art and architecture. Also, there is a philosophy course from University of Parahyangan, which is usually a three-month paid course of Rp500,000, but is now free during the large-scale social distancing. In this situation, the dissemination of knowledge can be more egalitarian, and people became more generous in making knowledge free to access.

Photography I Gde Milka