Pop as art, pop as exotica:
cross-border flows of Indonesian alternative popular music acts into Australian contemporary 'art'/performance contexts

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Popular music has a centuries-old history of invoking or adopting elements and signifiers from the high arts – as does the reverse process. Notable examples include progressive genres of the 1970s and electroacoustic/techno crossovers from the 1980s. Early studies such as Walker or Frith and Horne have documented and analysed this impulse in relation to the 1950s to the 1980s. Since then, interconnections and crossovers between popular music and various forms of contemporary art have persisted and diversified, validated by the erosion of boundaries between high and low culture and the eclecticism brought by currents of postmodernism. Popular music – and pop culture more broadly – have become a prominent part of the vocabulary and conceptual framework for the contemporary visual arts as well as for contemporary dance.

My paper further complicates this messy arena of boundary-crossing across genres and cultural divides by introducing yet other types of boundaries: those of place, specifically the neighbouring countries of Australia and Indonesia. The paper forms part of a much larger field of research into aspects of Australia's engagement with Indonesia (and Asia more broadly) through music (publications include Scott-Maxwell, "Australia and Asia"; "Australian Encounters"; "Early Jazz"; "Representing Indonesia"). Within this wider frame, the focus of the paper is two collaborative projects that have brought alternative Indonesian music acts into curated Australian 'art' contexts via their Australian 'gatekeepers'. Punkasila is an Indonesian punk band and artist collective initially formed by Australian visual artist, Danius Kesminas, that irreverently and controversially parodied aspects of Indonesia's political and military culture. Senyawa is a metal-influenced, experimental duo, or noise act, that uses home-made electric instruments and extreme vocal effects. Recently, they collaborated with Australian contemporary choreographers, Gideon Obarzarnek and Lucy Guerin, in a contemporary dance work called *Attractor*, which was itself influenced by Gideon's experiences in Indonesia.

Placed within their Australian 'art' contexts, these two Indonesian alternative music acts contribute what can arguably be termed an 'othered' pop. While not world music as such, they evoke issues more commonly associated with the persistent world music debate (for example, Stokes). These include issues around decontextualisation, cultural representation, exoticisation, intercultural collaborative processes and the mutual benefits of cross-cultural exchange and 'first world' exposure weighed against considerations of inequitable power relations in the creative collaborative process or vastly different financial and career outcomes.

The paper considers how these Indonesian acts are recontextualised for and understood by their 'art' audiences, what sorts of meanings might be lost and gained in the process, and also some of their collaborative aspects. In doing so, however, I also want to argue for a more nuanced perspective that takes into account their local Indonesian contexts, their agency as musicians as well as the particular circumstances of Australian-Indonesian cross-border engagement that have re-situated them within Australian contemporary high art environments.

The Indonesian musical context for the two bands I'm discussing here is what is broadly referred to in Indonesia as underground music (*musik bawah tanah*) or indie or alternative music (Jube 30). With its roots in the progressive Indonesian and U.S. rock bands of the 1970s, underground music embraces multiple distinct genres across punk, metal, hardcore, grindcore as well as myriad sub- and hybridised genres. Indonesian underground music mostly registers a grass roots music-culture and a distinctly DIY ethic that shuns the mainstream music industry (Wallach 6-9). The scene has morphed culturally and socially since the 1990s when alternative music often represented, through its subcultures and sometimes more overtly, an expression of opposition to the then authoritarian New Order regime. In the post-1998 more liberal reformation (*reformasi*) era – when even Indonesia's president is a self-declared metalhead – underground music might be less explicitly oppositional, but continues to set its musicians and fans apart from the social and cultural mainstream and the commercial music industry. 'Underground music
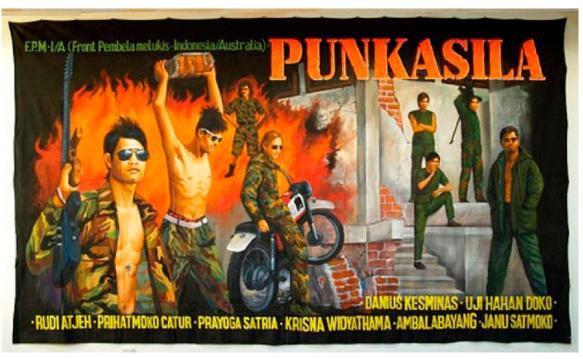
provides young Indonesians with a set of alternative identities and lifestyles, providing a route to escape from, challenge, or at least negotiate the dominant frameworks of nationality, ethnicity and class' (Martin-Iverson 382).

The massive embrace of social media, youtube and other online forums in Indonesia from the 2000s has given alternative music scenes access to global music networks and an unprecedented array of new models and influences. Nevertheless, Indonesian underground music continues to have distinctly place-based regional scenes in major urban centres such as Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta and Bali, as Baulch's study of the 1990s Balinese scene demonstrates (Baulch). Both of the music acts I'm discussing here hail from Yogyakarta (commonly referred to as Jogja), which is a small university city in Java's cultural heartland that attracts students from across Indonesia's regions and diverse language and ethnic groups. It is recognised as a centre of both traditional and contemporary Indonesian culture and its vibrant music scene has its own interconnections and cross-overs with the Indonesian contemporary visual art and theatre scene.

Punkasila, the first of the two bands discussed here, was in fact the brainchild of maverick Australian visual artist Danius Kesminas. During a four-month Asialink-funded residency in Yogyakarta in 2006 he made connections and collaborated with young, underground musicians who were also students at the local arts school, Institut Seni Indonesia.

Punkasila flags its dual aspects in its name, which references both its musical genre and Indonesia's state ideology of *pancasila*. The parody extends to cooption and subversion of Indonesia's national emblem as the band's own emblem, replacing the motto of 'unity in diversity' with a machine gun-shaped guitar. Punkasila's first project revolved around a political and cultural provocation that both mocked the elite art world it was projected at and, more controversially, Indonesia's military, political and even religious institutions and organisations. The music and other materials for the project initially came out of Kesminas's self-confessed ignorance of Indonesian history, culture and language and his discovery of Indonesians' fondness for acronyms, or abbreviations, as well as wordplay (*plesetan*) (as recounted to Maidment and Feary) – rather than any engagement by his young local collaborators with Indonesian politics through their music. However, as both underground musicians and visual artists, they enthusiastically and collectively explored the possibilities of Danius's ideas to create a collection of music tracks with lyrics consisting of shouted repetitions of Indonesian acronyms together with word-play inversions and reinterpretations of them, for example, RPKAD (Resimen Pasukan Komando Angkatan Darat=Army Para-commando Regiment) became Rampung Kenthu Anake Duwekmu (Let's have sex! But the child will be yours), or FPI (Islamic Defenders Front=Front Pembela Islam) transformed into Front Pembela Ibu (Front for the Defence of Mothers).

Performed in a raw, hard-edged, fast and loud punk-rock style coupled with a high-energy stage format, these songs were released on a CD called *Acronym Wars* (Punkasila). The band has also produced a host of associated art objects with the assistance of local craftsmen: imitation military camouflage outfits made using the traditional dying technique of *batik*, hand-carved wooden electric guitars in the shape of AK-47s, grenade-shaped microphones, posters, banner art and graphic art comics.

This or later Punkasila projects have been presented in a series of exhibitions and art gallery performances as well as alternative music venues in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Yogyakarta, Jakarta and also Havana, Cuba (Kesminas et al.; Darren Knight Gallery). In Australia, Punkasila's reception is skewed by the fact that their audiences have comprised mostly aficionados of the art world or people with Indonesia interests or connections rather than members of local alternative music scenes, a point I will return to.

The second act, Senyawa, consists of two musicians, vocalist Rully Shabara and instrumentalist and instrument-maker Wukir Suryadi. Like the Punkasila musicians, both come out of the Yogyakarta underground music scene, having each come to Jogja as a teenager from elsewhere in Indonesia. Rully initially played in metal bands, while Wukir also connected into traditional and contemporary arts activity as a member of a contemporary theatre company. Performing as Senyawa since 2011, they have moved into a more experimental DIY 'noise music' space (Novak, "Down on the Street"). Senyawa combines extreme mostly word-less vocal effects across groans, breathy guttural and glottal sounds, screaming and squealing with electronic and guitar-like sounds produced on home-made instruments. Rully's vocals occasionally insert snatches of vernacular text from Indonesian languages or reference traditional genres such as *wayang* chant, though not explicitly, while Wukir's unorthodox electrified instrument inventions are adapted from traditional Indonesian instruments, notably his bowed or plucked bamboo zither instrument, which he calls 'bambuwukir' (Senyawa, "Interview"). Coupled with an intense and compelling live stage presence, the duo creates a sonic landscape that seems hard for commentators to pin down, with descriptions of their music ranging across "caustic deconstructed metal-Javanese fusion" (Szumer), "a minimalist version of art-rock" (Thee), "noise act…combined with black-metal aesthetics" (Senyawa, "A Conversation"), or "Indonesian experimental folk" (Senyawa, "Interview").

Although Senyawa's first overseas gigs were in Australia and they have visited many times since, they have developed a formidable international profile well beyond Australia in America, Japan, China and especially Europe through their tours and albums. This came well before they were approached by cutting-edge Australian contemporary dance choreographer and curator, Gideon Obarzarnek – first to be 'cultural guides' and 'translators' for a traditional Javanese trance dance (*kuda lumping*) performance that he brought to the Supersense Festival in Melbourne in 2015 and then, in 2017, to provide music for and collaborate on his new contemporary dance work, *Attractor*. This dance work, which was performed at the AsiaTopa Festival in Melbourne that year and later toured to the United States, was inspired by Gideon's experience of seeing a similar trance performance in Java that was facilitated by the Senyawa musicians (Scott-Maxwell, "From *Kuda Lumping*"). In the contemporary dance performance, *Attractor*, the two musicians created their music from the centre of a shifting vortex of young highly-trained dancers who moved rapidly around the space in choreographed swarms or executed supposedly

trance-like repetitive movements. The musicians were mostly motionless throughout, except at one point when they were physically picked up by the dancers and carried around as Rully continued to produce vocal sounds and Wukir played a traditional pentatonic bamboo flute (*suling*).

Punkasila and Senyawa, and the two collaborative Australian art projects they have been involved in, are musically and artistically entirely different.Taken together, however, they raise some common issues in terms of their reception and how we might interpret them. Firstly, there is the wider environment of cross-border Australia/Indonesia cultural flows and person-to-person interactions. In fact, both Australian collaborators in the two projects have strongly connected with contemporary Indonesia through their personal experiences of Yogyakarta's art and music scene, which they have brought into their projects.

Media materials, exhibition catalogues and programs created for the two projects made some attempt to unpack, or 'translate', their Indonesian social, cultural and musical references for audiences. Overall, however, these materials tended to highlight complexity, transgressive aspects and 'difference' – also echoed in their reception via the press, blogs and other commentary. So, in Punkasila's case, focus was on those things that made it 'art', such as the "hidden coded ironic meanings", the edgy, provocative and potentially risky politics of their send-ups and their visual art paraphenalia, with little or no attention paid to the music as such – either its authentic stripped-down punk sound or as social practice – for example:

> Plesetan [word-play] flip hierarchies and power relationships on their head…[They] used these playful strategies to say one thing and mean many others…. Such an approach aligns beautifully with contemporary art strategies that privilege multivalence. (Low)

> …*plesetan*, the concept of a coded, punning doublespeak that smuggled references to social and political controversies into the arts. (McAuliffe 103)

> The band's uniform of military fatigues, with all their symbolism of order and the state, are rendered fashionable, local and idiosyncratic through traditional *batik* processes. (Low)

In the case of Senyawa, promotion and commentary emphasised what was perceived as either the aurally transgressive, "menacing", "mutating" or "inhuman" quality of their sound, or its more exotic "other worldly" aspects, such as their "tribal" influences and "shamanic" character – rather than placing it in its 'noise' music context – for example: "the energy of a teenage thrash metal band and the shamanistic tumult of a village exorcism" (Novak, "Down on the Street") or "a bird of prey honing in on a small mammal" (Sherburne).

At work here, I suggest, are processes of aestheticisation, decontextualisation and exoticisation that arise from the projects' transnational and high art critical environments, the types of audience they target and the artistic agendas prioritised by their Australian gatekeepers – agendas which, ultimately, also advance their careers artistically as well as financially. Yet connecting through contemporary pop forms to traditional culture deflects away from the process of othering that conventionally accompanies external engagement with Indonesian music, arguably redeeming it within a post-colonial context. Further, these forms are drawn into a Western art environment that privileges current notions of contemporary art as cool, hip and eliding with pop culture – as well as older notions of the individual artist or musician as 'hero' – downplaying the collective, specifically Indonesian context of which the bands and their musical activities are a part.

There is however an alternative perspective that brings into greater focus the Indonesian musicians and their contexts. Given that artists in Indonesia need to be creatively and financially self-suffcent, there are undoubtedly substantial financial rewards from performing outside of Indonesia. Their transnational profile also gives them cultural capital that helps them get other overseas gigs and, locally, increases their status nationally beyond their place-based scenes.

But even in relation to their transnational activities, these musicians have considerable agency in multiple ways – to the extent, arguably, of what could be described as a degree of reverse exploitation. Senyawa's overall international touring success and many ongoing opportunities override any additional career or even, perhaps, financial benefit from being part of the Australian *Attractor* dance project. When I asked them about what they gained from their involvement in the project, they emphasised that it represented a "different" experience. Furthermore, at the many gigs they do in Europe and elsewhere, they mostly perform to audiences from the experimental or noise scene, who engage with the band's music from a more insider and culturally neutral position. This includes their regular appearances at Melbourne's Make It Up Club. From the perspective of Indonesian/Australian cultural influences and flows, they have been single-handedly responsible through their gigs at this venue for a strong

reverse flow of movement and activity from Melbourne back to Yogyakarta, as their Melbourne fans visit Jogja to experience the scene there for themselves (Shabara and Suryadi, personal interview).

The Punkasila musicians have also arguably flipped, or at least unsettled, the balance of the collaborative process, making use of their Australian collaborator, Danius, to develop their practice and build up their own artistic standing both locally and internationally. But even within Punkasila, Danius "does not assume full control of what the band does and, given languages barriers, is not always clear on its direction" (McAuliffe). And his role as a "deliberately ignorant foreigner" (McAuliffe) has provided a foil for his Indonesian collaborators to get away with the politically and culturally sensitive content of their songs and act. Danius himself says: "I take the heat and suddenly they're empowered" (Maidment and Feary).

Also important within this alternative more Indonesia-focused narrative is the Senyawa and Punkasila musicians' connectedness to their own 'place' and the spaces within it that inform and enable their scenes. The compact and culturally open city of Yogyakarta offers them a dynamic thriving close-knit, highly collective and collaborative environment that, despite lack of infrastructure, venues and financial and other resources, creates its own opportunities as well as challenges through the need to be resourceful. For example, Senyawa vocalist, Rully, says of Jogja: "it's a very accessible place, so it's easier for networking and collaborating with each other. It's conducive to experimentation and exploring new things" (Novak, "Senyawa").

Yogyakarta also provides them with a shared cultural identity and the artistic self-assurance that also informs their music. For Senyawa instrumentalist Wukir, Jogja provides 'time to rest, rehearse and learn again'. "Even if we are small as a fingernail", he says, "we are still a part of Indonesian culture" (Novak, "Down on the Street"), while Rully observes that, "Indonesia is actually a part of the world, so your band doesn't need to play shows overseas to call yourself an 'international' band" (Senyawa, "A Conversation").

To conclude, in bringing pop into 'art' and Indonesia into Australia, these Indonesian alternative music acts straddle different types of cultural boundary as part of their collaborative Australian projects. In the process, they create new meanings according to their audiences and the contexts in which they are placed as well as through their collaborative creative interactions. The two projects also draw attention to the complexity of intercultural collaborations that need to be understood as involving a two-way flow of both creative 'inputs' and outcomes that empower, or at least facilitate, both the Australian artists and their Indonesian collaborators in different ways and contribute to the rich field of cross-border cultural interaction between Australia and Indonesia. But, ultimately, the value of the transnational for these alternative bands is balanced by the value of locality – as place, culture and identity.

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