Biner 1001

Tita Salina

Jakarta is still the center of a contested narrative that is a tug-of-war between interests, although the place is no longer comfortable to live in due to decades and waves of urbanization, which have made the city spread out, densely packed and expensive. Jakarta, with its ability to provide everything, suffers from a myriad of causes and effects of overlapping problems at its age, which is approaching half a millennium. Its ambition to become a world-class city driven by population growth demands development that is, on almost all fronts, exploitative. These demands of a free global market and its lifestyles, which are almost impossible to resist, pay very little attention to environmental and ecological consequences, and instead produces endless waste.



Mangrove conservation at Muara Angke, Jakarta. Photo by Irwan Ahmett.

Every day, 8,000 tons of garbage are brought to the landfills of neighboring cities, and this creates mountains of garbage, or ends up like islands floating in the riverbanks. Ineffective waste treatment technology, poor waste management, low awareness and low levels of recycling have allowed this problem to get even more out of control. While the normalization program (*betonisasi*) of the 13 rivers in Jakarta to reduce silt, sedimentation, accumulation of garbage and flood overflow is being promoted, its effectiveness is still debatable; the project's implementation of concrete walls has had negative impacts on the economic activities of the people who depend on the water, and it has destroyed river ecosystems, and killed several plant species and endemic animals.

The government, instead of pursuing behavioral change towards garbage, has provided cleaning troops to dredge drains that are clogged with garbage and waste. We seem to have turned our backs on the water, mentally moving the position of our rivers and streams from the front yard to the backyard.

The project, *1001st Island—The Most Sustainable Island in Archipelago,* has had the opportunity to exhibit in various cities and countries, as waste is a global issue and transcends national borders. Pollution that destroys the oceans occurs everywhere. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is like a new "continent," created from rotating ocean currents that carry

trash and debris from all around the world. The non-degradable plastic waste that is scattered by waves in the ocean, turn into smaller particles of micro-plastics, which later can be found in the bellies of the ocean's creatures which swallowed them without knowing. Problems like these require a massive collective agreement and a massive scale of commitment, but until now, nothing has been able to trigger such a movement, as the prevalence of state borders has also prevented us from producing solutions. What exists is the proliferation of the export and import business of waste from developed countries to third world countries such as Indonesia, which, incidentally, has increased our national import statistics. It's classic: this is how we want to deal with problems of such magnitude, and one wonders how we are expected to overcome a global pandemic and the climate crisis. There are countless initiatives by individuals, communities and medium-scale producers that have committed to reduce or even stop the use of non-biodegradable materials such as plastics and Styrofoam, which were attractive because they are cheap, practical, lightweight, and resistant to dirt and odor. Unfortunately, the short duration of use of these materials makes us produce waste very quickly— which happens even in countries that already have the technologies to process everything from household waste to nuclear radiation.

Jakarta is the country's capital city, located on the coast of Java island, but it might give up this status, if the government decides to move the capital to Penajam, East Kalimantan. In 2019, this position was vigorously voiced even though the idea of moving the capital city has existed since the previous administration, but with the emergence of a pandemic that seems to never end, it appears that this plan has dropped down in priority. Behind the skyscrapers, Jakarta faces an urgent ecological problem that weighs heavily on its responsibility as the center of government and business, and for this reason there have been plans to move the capital, and perhaps Jakarta is also just too old and tired. Jakarta will turn 400 years old this year; it was once called Batavia and was designed as a harbour city by VOC, and was home to Europeans, Chinese, Portuguese, while the rest were laborer or slaves from Nusantara. The city has endured coastal abrasion, rising sea levels, land subsidence due to continuous groundwater extraction, flooding and unresolved industrial and household waste problems. Not to mention the climate crisis: as the earth's temperature warms up due to human activities releasing too much carbon into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels, this makes ocean temperatures warmer, and causes the volume of the sea to expand and sea levels to rise. The threat of the city sinking is increasingly evident with land subsidence going up an average of 17cm per year. Of the world's major cities, Jakarta is among those predicted to sink the fastest, and it is estimated that one-third of its area will be under sea-level by 2050. Even now, few preventive measures to overcome the problem have been implemented. Two-to-fourmeter high seawalls protecting against abrasion and tidal flooding were built along the north coast of Jakarta, which has resulted in a covering of the horizon and a separation of fishermen from their habitat and boats. So far, 9.3 km of sea wall, out of the targeted 62 km, has been built, but the water seems to always find a way in. At the end of 2019, a 100meter seawall with a thickness of 1-meter collapsed under the waves of Jakarta Bay and then slowly sank, and now looks like a "perfect" slope and has become the world's most expensive fishing spot, on a seafront free of mosquito

attacks. The 1.5 trillion rupiah (105 million USD) cost that was spent looks like a big waste.

In this, Jakarta is not alone; cities in other parts of the world such as Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Shanghai, Venice and Rotterdam also face the same problem (90% of the area in the city of Rotterdam is already below sea level). In each of these cases, the governments are competing to save the city from drowning with extremely expensive projects, acting as if they were God, even though the reality is that ecological destruction and environmental degradation cannot be avoided. These expensive projects are only able to buy more time. So, the fate of the candidate for the new Indonesian capital city will more or less end up the same, as the ambition to move up and become an upper-middle-class society, all under the guise of nationalism, seems unstoppable. One can see this manifest in the proposed architectural designs for the new city, which are filled with utopian symbols of unity. (Incidentally, Irwan Ahmett and I have embarked on a project that will make special observations regarding the ex-mining craters in the Penajam area, East Kalimantan, which disguise themselves as poisonous lakes and continue to stalk victims.)

So far, the sea has only been seen as a commodity and regional and national borders are not only maintained but celebrated, without a care for what is contained by these borders, or the humans who depend on the sea for their livelihoods. We often hear stories of heroism in overcoming enemies and invaders that are almost like fiction. Yet the sea remains a big mystery. In Jakarta, the city center, the business districts and housing areas extend to the South, further away from the sea. Jakarta Bay which is black, smelly and full of pollution, makes us turn our backs even more to the sea, as if the sea were a giant trash bin. The phrase *"Ke laut aja lo!"* (which literally translates as "just go to the sea", but the real meaning is closer to "go f*ck yourself!") further affirms our attitude that the sea is just a wasteland and meaningless place. In general, maritime matters in the archipelago always privilege the perspective of the land. The meaning of archipelago (archipelagic state/archipelago) should be "a sea country sprinkled with islands", not "an archipelago surrounded by sea."[1]



Sunken Nirwana Island. Photo by Irwan Ahmett.

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Adrian B. Lapian, Orang Laut, Bajak Laut, Raja Laut: Sejarah Kawasan Laut Sulawesi Abad XIX , (Yogyakarta, Komunitas Bambu, 2009).

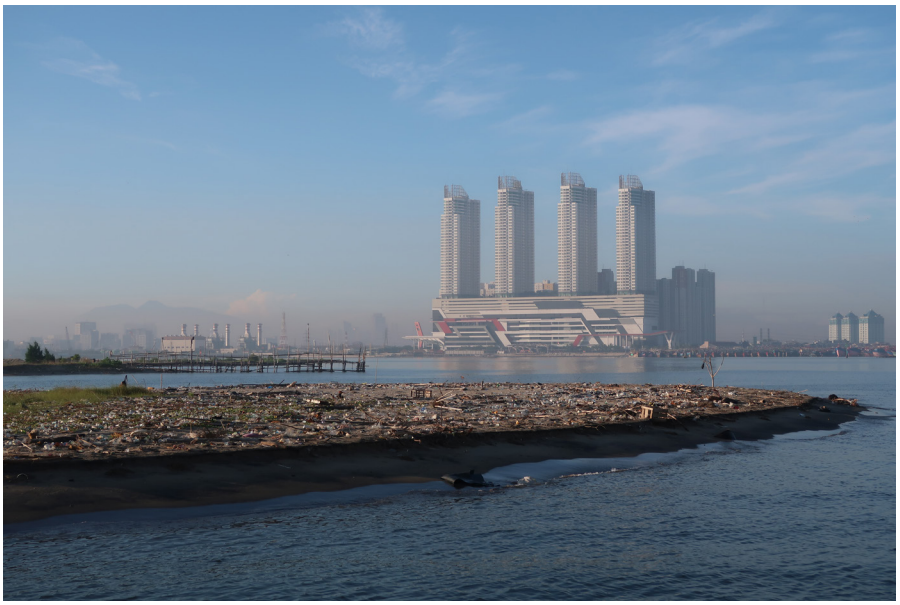
From my own trips near the coast of Jakarta that were routinely carried out in the last two years (Ziarah Utara), I have learned about my own misguided narratives and misperceptions as a mainlander, which range from not fully understanding the working hours, tides, and weather at sea and land, to becoming more aware of sunlight and moonlight in order to swim more safely. In other countries whose territories are surrounded by water such as the Netherlands, school-age children are obliged to learn how to swim. In the pockets of fishing communities along the coast of Jakarta, when the sun is above their heads until just before sunset, the children jump into the water to play while cooling off, and their parents, who are traditional fishermen, use small motorized boats that are only able to navigate the shallow sea, and are not comparable to the large ships that sail in the high seas. Unfortunately, most of the shallow sea close to the coast is highly polluted, which means contaminated fish as well as other ocean biotas. The income of these fisherman stand in contrast to the countless number of fish in the ocean, and their fate is similar to that of small-scale local farmers. The process chain from the catching fish to food arriving at our table is very long: the first-hand fishermen receive the smallest income, and over the years, their economic conditions have not improved; Pantura fishermen have been confined and afflicted by systemic poverty.



Tower sign of Nirwana Island. Photo by Irwan Ahmett.

In 2014, in the midst of these difficult conditions, news was heard that several fishing boats in Jakarta Bay were having difficulty getting to the middle of the sea because there were people driving them away, and the boats were forced to take a longer route than usual. It was then discovered that there was a project to fill the sea with sand (a land reclamation project), and barges could be seen spraying massive amounts of sand. D Island or Golf Island, as advertised in the marketing brochures, was being built. This island is one of a group of 17 artificial/reclaimed islands that are planned to be built along Jakarta Bay, part of a mega project of the National Capital Integrated Coastal Development (NCICD), or better known as the Giant Sea Wall which aims to protect Jakarta from floods. The allotment of this island is to empower coastal areas, expand the mainland of Jakarta and increase land for business and hou-

sing, which is not cheap. The fishermen now have to bear the increased cost of fuel for their boats because their established routes have been disturbed and their travel time is longer, but the amount of catch is often less, and their income is getting smaller. In 2016, hundreds of fishermen "sealed off" another artificial island, G Island, which is still a stretch of sand. The protest against this project grew more intense because it is believed that it will drastically affect marine life, and the faster sedimentation occurs, the dirtier the sea will become. In 2018, the expansion of the reclamation project was halted, but the development of the four islands that had already been created (Islands C, D, G and N) would nevertheless continue, and the buildings on D Island that were previously deemed illegal were issued with legal documents and recently re-marketed; there seems to be no other way towards a solution for all stakeholders because the value of money at stake is just too large. When I looked closely at G Island in 2019, the conditions were in tatters: the dredged sand land had dissolved and was eroded by the currents, and it had become a stop for seagulls and herons. But in the near future its fate will change, as G Island will become a built-up island because the extension of the permit to reclaim it will soon happen.



G Island. Photo by Irwan Ahmett.

The irony of this reclamation island mega project is that there have been seven islands in the Thousand Islands cluster that have sunk due to abrasion and rising sea levels. The islands are Ubi Besar, Ubi Kecil, Nirwana, Dapur, Payung Kecil, Air Kecil, and Nyamuk Kecil. Ubi Besar Island was once inhabited, but then it became increasingly unsafe to live on due to sand mining for artificial beaches and the Soekarno-Hatta international airport, and from 1952 to 1954, residents gradually fled as climate refugees to Pulau Untung Jawa due to continuous shrinkage, until Ubi Besar finally sank. Now that it sits four meters below the surface of the water, and what you can see are dead white corals, and not the slightest remains or ruins of any human civilization can be seen. Before it totally sank, Ubi Besar Island had one more sad story. In 1962, it was empty and arid, and there was only a single crackle tree, under which was the tomb of a freedom fighter, Kartosuwiryo, who led the Darul Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army rebellion (1949-1962). Together

with his followers, he proclaimed the Islamic State of Indonesia, and after years of guerrilla fighting and hiding in the mountains, he finally surrendered under siege by the military as well as civilians. In military court, he was sentenced to death. Kartosuwiryo's family previously believed that the execution and burial was carried out on Onrust Island, and they always made their pilgrimage there, then in 2012 photos of the execution documentation were found (recorded by Fadli Zon), and it was revealed that the real location was on Ubi Besar Island. The island had completely disappeared by the 80s, and when I went there to follow the coordinates, the beacon tower had also disappeared—rusted, it must have collapsed. So, because of this, it's as if even history refuses to remember the traces of one of the nation's important figures.

Together, Irwan Ahmett and Imade a performance intervention **"The Undertow of Sorrow"**[2] which utilized the eddy pull right above Ubi Besar Island to create a meeting of three elements—ecological devastation, the clash of ideologies, and human emotional responses—as well as embark on a pilgrimage to seek out the lost islands that sank.



Ubi Besar Island. Photo archive of Fadli Zon.

On the other side of the story, from the eastern tip of Java, there appears the youngest island: Lusi Island, born from the mudflow that has not stopped since 2006 (thus the name: Lusi = Lumpur Sidoarjo or Sidoarjo mudflow). A man-made disaster had eliminated dozens of villages, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, destroyed thousands of hectares of productive land for rice and sugar cane, and killed thousands of livestock. The memory of the hometown is lost, not only in the sense that the names of the villages are lost in state records, but these memories have been replaced by the narrative of a new island in the form of green mangrove forests. Farmers who have lost their fields have to find other economic sources, change their professions to become boat rental businesses or motorcycle taxi drivers to drive tourists around. It is not known whether the land resulting from this sedimentation will widen because until today the Sidoarjo mud around Lusi Island is still

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"The Undertow of Sorrow" which presented as a video work is a commission work and exhibited in Bangkok Art Biennale 2020 under the theme of "Escape Routes".

gushing. Fourteen years have passed, and still the settlement of compensation to residents has not been completed, the negotiation process has been very slow, and the disaster seems to be covered by dense mangrove forests. An irony again that a disaster that clearly damages the ecosystem and the environment and is categorized as a corporate crime can be turned into a land of greening and coastal rescue that is fully supported by the government: this is the illusion of the Lusi Island.



Squatting Bagang Tancap. Photo by Irwan Ahmett.

The sea on our back is climbing higher, irrigating the land, and it seems like we are repaying our debt to it. The effects of climate change, global warming and our carbon footprint may be slow to realise in our own short life spans, and the regrets seem to always come later. When eventually the sea levels rise further and more land sinks, I, who am afraid of water, and am barely just able to swim, I, who am not comparable to coastal children or babies who dive for dollars on Nirvana album covers, may have to rely on islands of non-biodegradable plastic waste that will be legalized, because the IMB (building permit) was removed in the Omnibus Law, and these will save me because they float and do not perish. Or maybe, the evolution of Homo Sapiens will accelerate, as we are consume fish that contains microplastics, which even now can be found in our newly-born babies. Genetic mutations will happen sooner that later, as pollution increases, new viruses infect us, and the warming earth accelerates the entire process. Anthropocentrism, which deemed humans as the center of everything in this world, is clearly a problematic ideology, as proven by the way we treat nature and other non-human creatures, as well as by the failings of our human-made laws, our morality, religion, and ideologies like nationalism. We have raced to conquer nature—but we have not even been able to conquer an invisible virus. Perhaps hoping for a change of human heart is futile, so maybe we should just leave it up to the uncompromising laws of nature, and let evolution take over it all.

Author's Bio

In Tita Salina's practice, intervention, installation and moving image come together in response to site-specific issues that have global resonance. 1001st island – the most sustainable island in archipelago 2015 explores transnational issues of community disenfranchisement, environmental pollution and government corruption as they manifest within the Indonesian government's grand plan for the restoration and redevelopment of Jakarta Bay. Recent notable exhibitions include 'Bangkok Art Biennale', Bangkok Art and Culture Center, Bangkok (2020); The Coming World: Ecology as the New Politics 2030–2100, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art ,Moscow, Russia (2019); Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina: The Ring of Fire (2014 – ongoing), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Singapore, Singapore (2019); From Bandung to Berlin: If all of the moons aligned, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, Germany (2016), among others.

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