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CURATED WORK

## Design It Yourself Surabaya: Reflective Notes on Designing a Festival

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### Abstract

As a relatively new, imported word, the term *desain* (design) in Indonesian is still mostly understood within its relations to three common academic fields—graphic, interior, and product design—and thus tends to be viewed as belonging to the ‘merely’ visual. While local cultural events and festivals have proliferated in Indonesia, the scope for a conference or a festival that explicitly address design therefore tends to be rather limited. This is not to say that design exhibitions and festivals do not exist. In fact, they have flourished in the country, particularly among university students, reflecting the growth of university design programs and schools to meet contemporary demand. Yet visual-based, market-led development has not been accompanied by institutional development in research and outreach (in the form of dialogues or critical publications), particularly ones that connect that development across different fields. Attaching the word *desain* to an event in Indonesia invariably means it is associated with either design student exhibitions, or an industrial expo showcasing printers or interior furnitures. This curated piece emerges as our reflection on designing—cobbling up, and calibrating—a design conference-festival from Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia in light of the national context in which *desain* is received and made meaningful.

### Keywords

**Design; Borderlines: Indonesia; Indonesian design; festivals; DIY; design thinking; creative industries; design conference-festivals**

Design exhibitions and festivals are flourishing in Indonesia, particularly amongst students, reflecting the growth of design programs in colleges and universities.

Yet the market-led growth of design has not been accompanied by development in research and outreach in the form of dialogues or critical publications. As a relatively new, imported word, the term *desain* (design) in Indonesian is still mostly understood in relation to its three most common academic units—graphic, interior, and product design.<sup>1</sup> Attaching the word design or *desain* to an event in Indonesia usually means it is immediately associated with either student exhibitions or an industrial expo showcasing printers or interior furniture. Rarely is *desain* considered in an expanded sense, as an approach to problem-solving or as a way of seeing the world. On top of the constraints of design academia in Indonesia, there is also a considerable linguistic discrepancy to consider, as the word *rancang*<sup>2</sup> in Indonesian is also widely used to refer to the broader conceptual and technical aspects of design. Of course, like many concepts in Indonesia, the use of these words varies across the region.<sup>3</sup> Even in Surabaya, the second biggest city in the country, there is ambiguity about their meaning.<sup>4</sup> So working in this city presents us with an interesting opportunity to work at the edges of mainstream design.

Design It Yourself Surabaya (DIYSUB)<sup>5</sup> was first organised in October 2011 as part of the programs in C2O library & collabitive [sic].<sup>6</sup> We wanted to have a forum where the practice and education of design could be discussed, debated, and critiqued; its definition stretched. With minimal resources, we started small by inviting our networks of local designers, architects, educators, and researchers to meet up in small group discussions, held during the weekends in the backyard of C2O. To increase visibility and enrich the experience, we also organised more festive side events such as a design market, movie screenings, workshops, and exhibitions. In its second year, it extended beyond C2O, to classrooms, stores, cafes, malls, libraries, the street, and—our last addition—the zoo.<sup>7</sup>

1 This separation between the visual, and the conceptual or technical aspects, seem to be reflected in the policy changes in the Indonesian creative economy, which now no longer list design within its subsector. Instead, the latest creative economy policy (based on the Presidential Regulation No. 6/2015) has broken design down into the three fields of graphic, interior, and product design.

2 During our first Design It Yourself Surabaya (DIYSUB) this linguistic discrepancy was also brought up by Professor Joseph Prijotomo, from architecture at the Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember (ITS).

3 For example, in Bandung, a city in which there is an established, prominent faculty in arts and design at the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), and which is a close distance from the national capital (and national media concentration) Jakarta, there is visibly less discord. Bandung has frequently touted and organised design-related events and contemporary ideas, such as 'design thinking,' 'design action,' and Helar Fest. The city has also been listed in the UNESCO Creative City Network for Design category.

4 The first university design program in Surabaya was established only in 1998 at Universitas Kristen Petra. Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember (ITS) also introduced product design in the same year, and graphic design in the following year. By comparison, in Bandung the Faculty of (Fine) Arts and Design was established in 1984, with longer roots to Balai Pendidikan Universiter Guru Gambar since the 1940s.

5 Elsewhere (2011, 2012) Azali has discussed the history of this design conference-festival.

6 C2O library & collabitive is an independent library and co-working space in Surabaya. Its mission is to create 'a shared, nurturing space, building tools and resources for humans (and non-humans) to learn, work, and interact with diverse communities and surrounding environment.' Full disclosure: Azali founded the C2O library & collabitive in 2008. More information about C2O can be found on its website: <https://c2o-library.net>.

7 In the 5th DIYSUB, we were interested in exploring design as a 'net that works'—as interconnected systems, webs of dynamic interactions among citizens, government, and business, as well as humans and non-humans. We situated the final round of programs within Surabaya Zoo, Indonesia's oldest zoo that also used to be the largest in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. The zoo has been through turbulent times, receiving negative critique for mismanagement and mistreatment of the animals. We thought that situating a design conference in the zoo brought a first-hand learning site to understand the contradictions, and challenges of the interrelatedness in today's world. None of the members of the DIYSUB team has ever been involved in the management of, or received any funds from, the zoo.



Figure 1 An exhibition organised as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> DIYSUB in in C20 library in collaboration with BRAngerous, a collective of female artists in Surabaya



Figure 2 HONFablab contacted us to conduct a roadshow about Fablab in Surabaya. We improvised by tying this roadshow up as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> DIYSUB to bring more visibility, interests, and link the information about these growing technologies with design practitioners in Surabaya



Figure 3 We received an offer from an event organiser working in a shopping mall in Surabaya to organise part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> DIYSUB within its compound. This immediately boosted the visibility and attendance turnout, but we also realised the spatial limitations that significantly modify visitors' engagement. Under the spotlight in the photo is White Shoes & the Couples Company, whose members are also active as musicians and designers. The night before they also gave a talk sharing their design processes



Figure 4 In the 4<sup>th</sup> DIYSUB, we organised a design walking tour exploring the typography of the old Chinatown in Surabaya



Figure 5 We usually collaborate with local campuses in integrating DIYSUB as guest workshops or talks into the classrooms. Here, we invited Papermoon Puppet Theatre, and received questions from the faculty, such as ‘how is puppet-making related to design?’



Figure 6 The closing of the 4<sup>th</sup> DIYSUB in 2014, held in the library of the Bank Indonesia. We put up blackboards along the pavement, encouraging passerbys (from the Car Free Day held every Sunday morning) to write what they wished for Surabaya. We were leisurely enjoying and observing the scene, when we were suddenly notified that the Mayor, whom we’d lobbied for months without any reply, wished to drop by and speak during the first panel



Figure 7 PRINTilan, a play on the word print and printilan, which means ephemera in Javanese language: the zine event at the 4<sup>th</sup> DIYSUB



Figure 8 Glass cutting and recycling workshop with Otak-atik, using old bottles

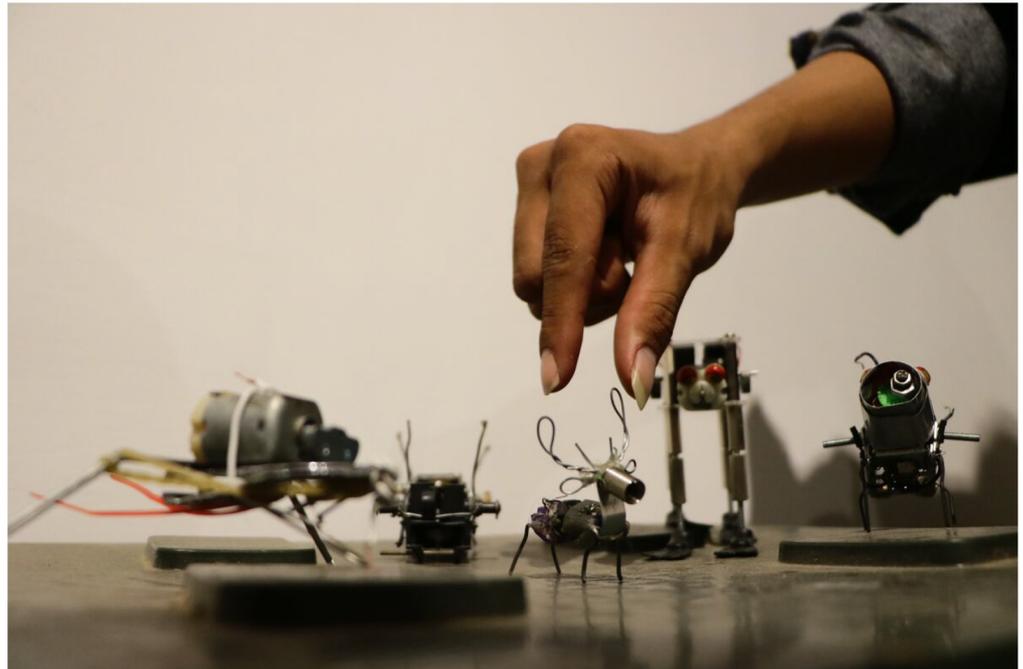


Figure 9 WAFT-LAB as one of our collaborators proposed organising a Hebocon, 'a robot contest for dummies' originating in Japan, as part of the programs



Figure 10 During the break in the 5<sup>th</sup> DIYSUB held in Surabaya Zoo, Saad Chinoy from Singapore conducted a workshop of making Caffeinator, a do-it-yourself coffee drip made using cloth hangers, used bottles, and stove tops



Figure 11 Closing performance of the 5<sup>th</sup> DIYSUB: Lantern performance to imagine how animals would live in the future. The performance was conceptualised by Kingsley Ng, a Hong Kong-based artist, and designed in collaboration with a local storytelling artist, Kak Nitnit, and Cak Opang, an artist-activist from Gresik who focused on preserving and developing *damar kurung* lanterns. We were initially amused and baffled by their storytelling, of animals wanting a habitat with air-conditioners and high-speed wi-fi. But as more and more children expressed similar sentiments in their storytelling, we began to be aware of the historical and material conditions that shaped these imaginings, and the estrangement that we were undergoing from our surrounding environment

As with many events in Indonesia, last-minute collaborations and adaptations were as common as delays and breakdowns at DIYSUB. Planning had to be loose and fluid. When a musician friend needed some help publicising his roadshow, we asked him to give a drawing workshop in exchange.<sup>8</sup> When we found a movie we wanted to screen, we emailed the producers and asked if we could subtitle it to Indonesian, in exchange for screening rights. These are the challenges of contemporary design—continuous calibrations, cobbling up solutions, and constant repair—in an era otherwise characterised by extreme growth and decay.

<sup>8</sup> Our musician friends in Surabaya, contacted by YES NO WAVE from Yogyakarta, were organising the roadshow of Arrington de Dionyso and Senyawa band. They linked us up to have Arrington conducting a side event to promote the tour—we turned it into a drawing workshop in C20 library as part of both DIYSUB and the tour.

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