



Nasi Goblek & Raja Kentut: an arranged marriage

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The history of anthropology has in large part consisted in taking concepts put together in the West ('religion', family', 'class', 'state'), trying to apply them in non-Western contexts, finding that they fit there rather badly at best, labouring to rework them so that they fit rather better, and then discovering in the end that, however reworked, many of the problems they pose – the nature of belief, the foundations of obligation, the inequality of life chances, the legitimacy of domination – remain clearly recognizable, quite alive.
Clifford Geertz¹

Everyone secretly loves a fart joke. Albeit base, it is at least an indicator of acceptance.

In 2009, assisted by Asialink, I spent three months as artist in residence at Cemeti Art House, a contemporary arts space in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. Cemeti is run by Dutch/Indonesian artist-partners, Mella Jarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo. Mella and Nindityo had been running Landing Soon, a cross-cultural residency program, for three years. The program, organised by Heden, in The Hague and Cemeti, brought Dutch artists and Indonesian artists into close quarters for a period of three months. Living, eating, working and ultimately exhibiting together, the pairing of artists created deep bonds and ongoing fusions across cultures.

As an Australian, to be thrown in at the deep end of the Indonesian contemporary arts scene and fully immersed at the local level, the potential to extend these new connections into my own networks became clear. My own arts practice became somewhat secondary as I set up a collaborative project, working with a group of local artists and the community.²

Jogja now feels like a second home; my networks there are solid and ongoing. As the consultant manager to the Woolloongabba Art Gallery (WAG) in Brisbane, I recently returned to Jogja for a dual purpose, to attend an exhibition opening and to introduce Brisbane artist Eric Rossi to Indonesian artist Lugas Syllabus.

Rossi was selected from the artists represented by WAG because of the underlying similarities in his work to the concepts and approach used by Syllabus. Preoccupied with media, travel, tourism and inequity in global shifts on art and culture, I felt that Rossi and Syllabus were approaching similar points from two very different directions and that this would be fertile soil to till. I introduced the two artists by email, they shared ideas and agreed to collaborate. Arrangements were made for each to spend time in the other's world, taking turns as the foreigner and the native, the outsider and the included, the guest and the host.

Syllabus at home in Jogja is young, successful, prolific, cynical, political and whimsical. His paintings, highly collectable and exhibited widely, comfortably disguise heavy messages in light clothing. Earlier works purvey an awareness of the precariousness and absurdity of his position in a globalised world. Commenting on differing worlds (as in *Third, First, and Art*), his comical figures illustrate a vulnerability and distrust of the market that sustains him. 'Eskimos' sit dumbfounded in the desert while camels roll in the snow. The young artist paints himself trying to change a lightglobe by standing on a pile of international art books.

Syllabus's fable-istic landscapes are somewhat apotropaic, protective and inclusive as well as seemingly naïve and innocent.



His heroes are accidental, his villains mythical. The depth of his intent is subtle and difficult to decipher.

Simultaneously attracted and repulsed by elements of difference, as a starting point for his Australian show, a series of drawings, *Animal as a King*, subtly raises the controversial difference in the treatment and perception of animals (see p.6 for image). At the time of writing, the debate still rages about the export of live cattle to Indonesia from Australia on the basis of difference in treatment for the animals once they have crossed borders. To the foreign eye, animals are revered in Australia. Syllabus has placed them higher again by sprinkling them lightly with glitter, crowning them and seating them upright, each on a throne. There they perch, with an added dignity and an ungainly foolishness.

Syllabus grew up in Sumatra in a small village, the name of which means 'Nature's Gate'. Much of his childhood was spent in and around the jungle where he respectfully observed animals in their natural habitat; his natural habitat. In cartooning native wildlife, Syllabus brings these differences in cultural perception, proximity and experience to the fore. His animals are unharmed yet they are displaced in being elevated to an unnaturally high status. Their cute appeal masks his disillusionment.

Rossi's trip to Jogja was timed to coincide with the opening of Syllabus's major solo show, *Independence Dead*, at Taman Budaya, Yogyakarta's main cultural centre. Rossi worked around the clock with Syllabus as part of the installation team, sharing food, stories and jokes amidst the work. Although Rossi was conspicuously foreign, he was soon adopted as a tall pale brother into a very tight-knit circle. Travel at a local level well surpasses the five-star experience.

Returning to Brisbane, Rossi submerged himself in documenting his encounters, painting extensively about the experiences of his trip. His visual travel diary illustrates moments of cultural confusion in a warmhearted, humorous approach. *Pikochinno* portrays the team photographer Piko Sugiento with his very first cappuccino. Unfamiliar with the beverage, he seasoned his cup with salt and pepper, to the great amusement of those more familiar with the drink. Humour can break down barriers. Inclusiveness and acceptance has emerged as Rossi's primary concern in the artworks resulting from his travels.

Born in Finland, Rossi immigrated to Brisbane as a child. His family continues to speak Finnish at home; Rossi is comfortably fluent in both English and Finnish. Growing up as a



foreigner, Rossi first travelled back to Finland as a young adult. There, he found himself to be a foreigner also, an outsider in both countries. Although Rossi considers himself to be Finnish/Australian he is not firmly or wholly either; he feels Finnish in Australia and Australian in Finland. This personal conflict about cultural identity drew him to his current research on the impact of travel and tourism across cultures.

As a performance artist, Rossi pilots a fantasy airplane as his alter ego, Captain Eric. The mock superhero Captain is part tour guide, partly the pilot Rossi fantasised he would become as a boy. His obsession with aircraft, travel and cultural tourism surfaces in his painting as universal icons of movement across culture and place: the happy umbrella drink, the floral lei. The Captain's plane is never on the ground for long; he is in a perpetual journey, seeking to find cultural authenticity in a home that may not exist.

This yearning for belonging has led both Syllabus and Rossi to focus their collaborative exhibition in Brisbane on the process of finding common ground. A similar sense of humour was the first link between them; through laughter they learned about their differences. The painting *No England* retells a funny story told to Rossi by an Indonesian man he met in Jogja, who ironically studied for the same degree at the same university in Brisbane as Rossi. The man described how he managed to evade being fined by police when they pulled over his car by pretending he could not speak English. Waving his hand and repeating 'No England, No England', he simply drove off, leaving the bemused policeman standing by the side of the road.

On closer examination, 'in' jokes can be used to exclude as well as include. Syllabus's paintings are inclusive by suggesting there is an exclusivity, an 'in joke', an 'oh, now I get it!' moment. His compositions are often three-sided, with the viewer on the fourth side, including them in his implausible landscape or room.

The title of the collaborative exhibition in Brisbane, *Nasi Goblok & Raja Kantut (your time, my time)*, has an exotic ring, unless you are familiar with Javanese. Syllabus and Rossi have adopted Javanese pseudonyms for the show's duration, although the translations are not to be found in a travel dictionary. Rossi earned his nickname in a restaurant as he valiantly and fumblingly tried to order a meal. He asked for a serve of *nasi goblok*, which translates as 'rice idiot'. Again, there was laughter and the moment became a fond memory.

Syllabus has since taken up the crown as Raja Kentut, the 'King of Farts'. To Syllabus, 'When the king farts, everyone should smell it!' Everyone farts ... but is the king's fart better? Status alters perception. The fart may smell but the smell may be revered.

As this article goes to print, Syllabus is resident artist in Brisbane's South Bank as part of an open, public studio project titled the Wandering Room (www.thewanderingroom.org). Passersby are welcome to come into his studio; a large glass-fronted shop in busy Grey Street. Syllabus interacts with and documents his visitors, searching for the 'real Aussie'.

Rossi is now the host and Syllabus the outsider.³ No longer a big-shot art star with a team of artisans and a dedicated following, Syllabus again finds himself as a village boy in a big city, similar to his experiences when he first moved to Jogja from his Sumatran village.



Neither Syllabus nor Rossi can ever be wholly in or of the world of the other. In introducing the two artists, by collaborating with them to bring about this exhibition, the gallery's intention is to reveal something of their shared experience. Through the revelatory process of exchange, we hope to provide a glimpse into how one's own culture might appear through another's eyes, and to encourage acceptance through familiarity towards a deeper understanding and connectedness between Indonesia and Australia as neighbouring countries. 🌱

1. Clifford Geertz, 'Popular Art and the Javanese Tradition', in the journal *Indonesia*, Vol. 50, October 1990, Southeast Asia Program Publications at Cornell University, pp. 77-94.

2. See Cassandra Schultz, 'There be Dragons', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 220, June 2009, pp. 55-56.

3. Eric is hosting Lugas in terms of providing accommodation (initially), in sharing nearby studio spaces at South Bank and Queensland College of Art, and in general running around.

Nasi Goblok & Raja Kantut (your time, my time) is showing at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery in Brisbane until 29 October 2011; the related project will culminate in a publication late 2011/early 2012.

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P71 1/ Lugas Syllabus, *A Present or A Burden*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40cm.

2. Lugas Syllabus, *Step by step my friend*, 2011, fibreglass, wood, metal, carpaint, 600 x 200 x 100cm.

P72: (clockwise from top left) 1/ Lugas Syllabus, *Hiding after Landing*, 2011, installation with fibreglass, parachute, wood, life-size; installation view Taman Budaya Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Cultural Centre). Photograph by Piko Suginto.

2/ Eric Rossi, *My Dad's Aunt Olga I*, 2010, photograph of a 2010 performance in Ballina, NSW, with simultaneous projection by the artist onto a BELL 206L Long Ranger helicopter in flight; digital print, 76 x 11cm; photograph by Dacchi Dang.

3/ Eric Rossi, *Pikochinno*, 2011, oil on canvas, 121.5 x 152cm.

4/ Eric Rossi, *No Durian*, 2011, oil on linen, 122.5 X 102cm.

P73: Lugas Syllabus, *Hiding after Landing (detail)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 600 x 200cm.

Images courtesy the artists and Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane.