A Vagabond Cosmopolitan's Note on Violence: Irwan & Tita's "Fire Rim" Project

滾滾原野浮生漫談神話之動物寓記：伊旺及希蒂妲《火之環》計劃

Note: "Note-hunting" as part of their ongoing 10 year collaboration of artistic and social intervention reflecting on the geopolitical issues in the Pacific Rim, Irwan and Tita reexamine the relations between Indonesia and Singapore in the Straits of Malacca, one of the most important waterways in Southeast Asia. Responding to state and border controls around these colonialism, nationalism and capitalism, they propose eight ways to penetrate the borders of Singapore — inspired by historical acts of seafaring, smuggling, subversion and 'unequal' trade/ promises'.

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Irwan & Tita, "Borneo-journey" YUMI (2018), image courtesy of the artists
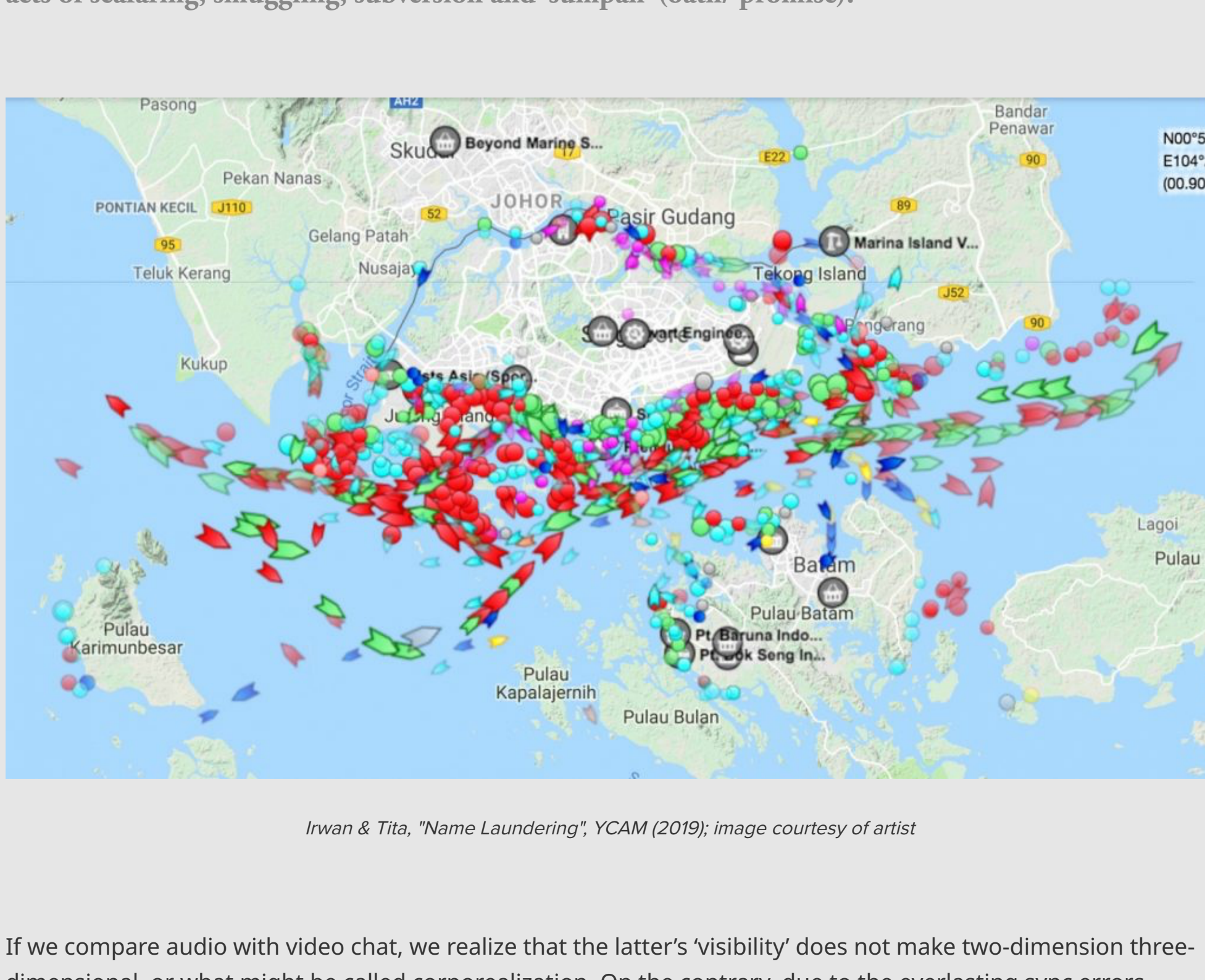
If we compare audio with video chat, we realize that the latter's 'visibility' does not make two-dimension three-dimensional, or what might be called 'corporealization'. On the contrary, due to the ascending eyes across between video and audio, the speaking and becomes an inappropriate ventriloquist puppet. I had an interview appointment with Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina on June afternoon at a video chat. Irwan and Tita, the married couple duo artists based in Jakarta, worked on the project "Fire Rim" project, a series of art-based social interventions that travel from colonialism, nationalism and capitalism; they propose eight ways to penetrate the borders of Singapore — inspired by historical acts of seafaring, smuggling, subversion and 'unequal' trade/ promises'.
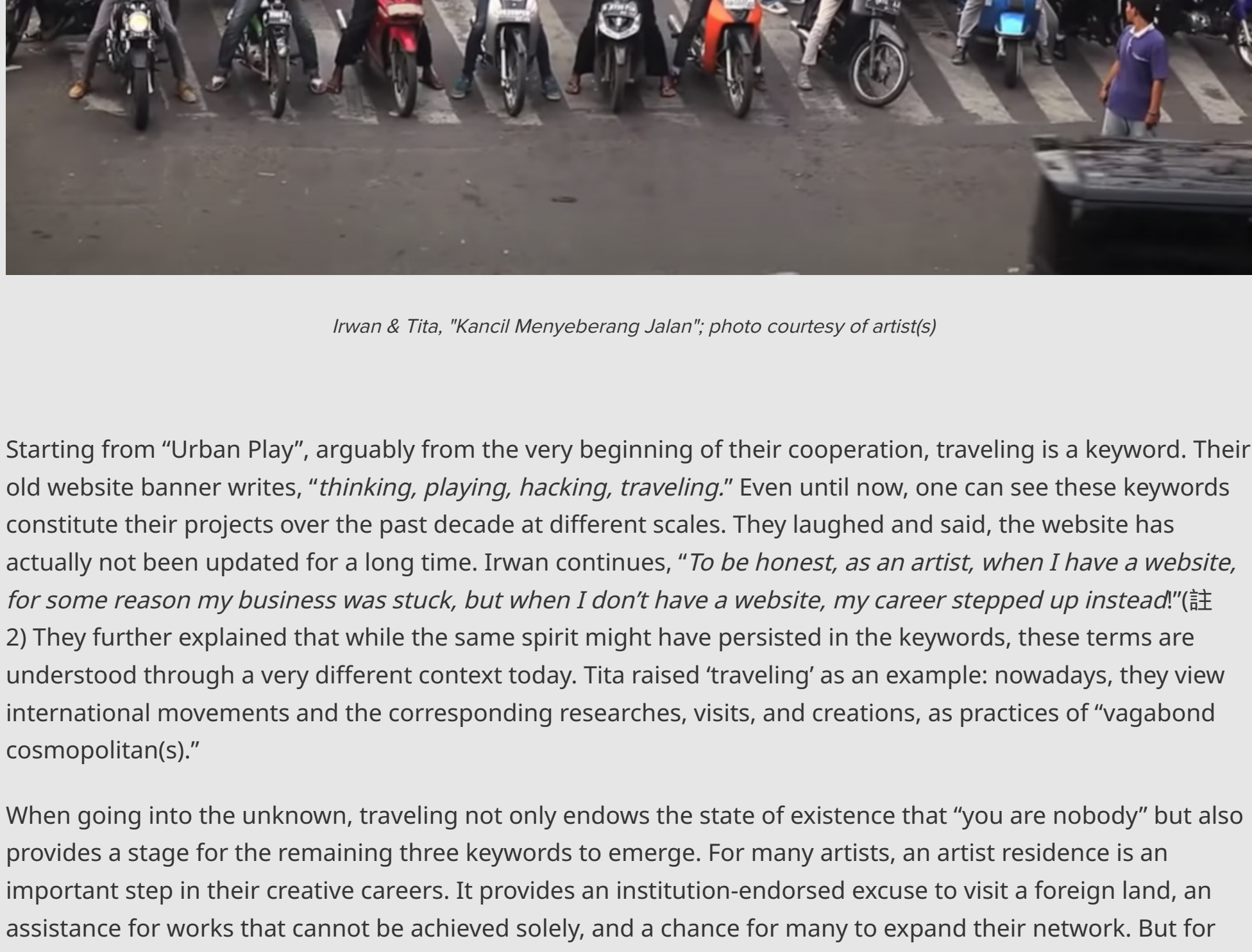
Irwan and Tita.two are deeply affected by the pandemic as well, with many projects suspended or deferred. Although both of them work and live in Jakarta, after being prevented from flying around, they noted, this might be the longest they have ever been at home. With background in graphic design – both graduated from the Institut Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Institute of Arts) – they worked as graphic designers for ten years. When Irwan and Tita started their first project "Urban Play" as artists in 2010, they were not familiar with the field of art and bends. They were simply inspired by Jakarta everyday life, beginning with observing the behavior of people wandering in public spaces.

Despite its deficiencies at all levels, as an economic center, Jakarta still serves as a destination where everyone continuously rushes into in hope of making more money and seeking opportunities. It is everyone's battlefield. The situation frustrates Irwan and Tita: there are two choices now, yield (mean, either you move to other cities, or you have to face the issues by adjusting your mindset and perspective. They chose the latter. In doing so, although being unable to harbor future prospect for the city of Jakarta, they are at least able to reimagine the present from different angles. For instance, traffic jams might be a waste of time, but it might also be a chance to move around the city under a different kind of speed and condition.

The adjustment of the mindset allows people not only to stay in the city but also to transfer originally frustrating issues into productive retreat. When maneuvering into social issues as a praxis, a sense of humor becomes the key: "Humor is a universal language," said Irwan, "what we want to highlight is usually extremely challenging or highly sensitive issues and a humor allows us to create a tunnel between places and an audience easily. In our culture, if you tell a lot of jokes, you will create a lot of friends. A sense of humor is also a negotiation technique and praxis in Indonesian society."

An Artist Residence of Irregular

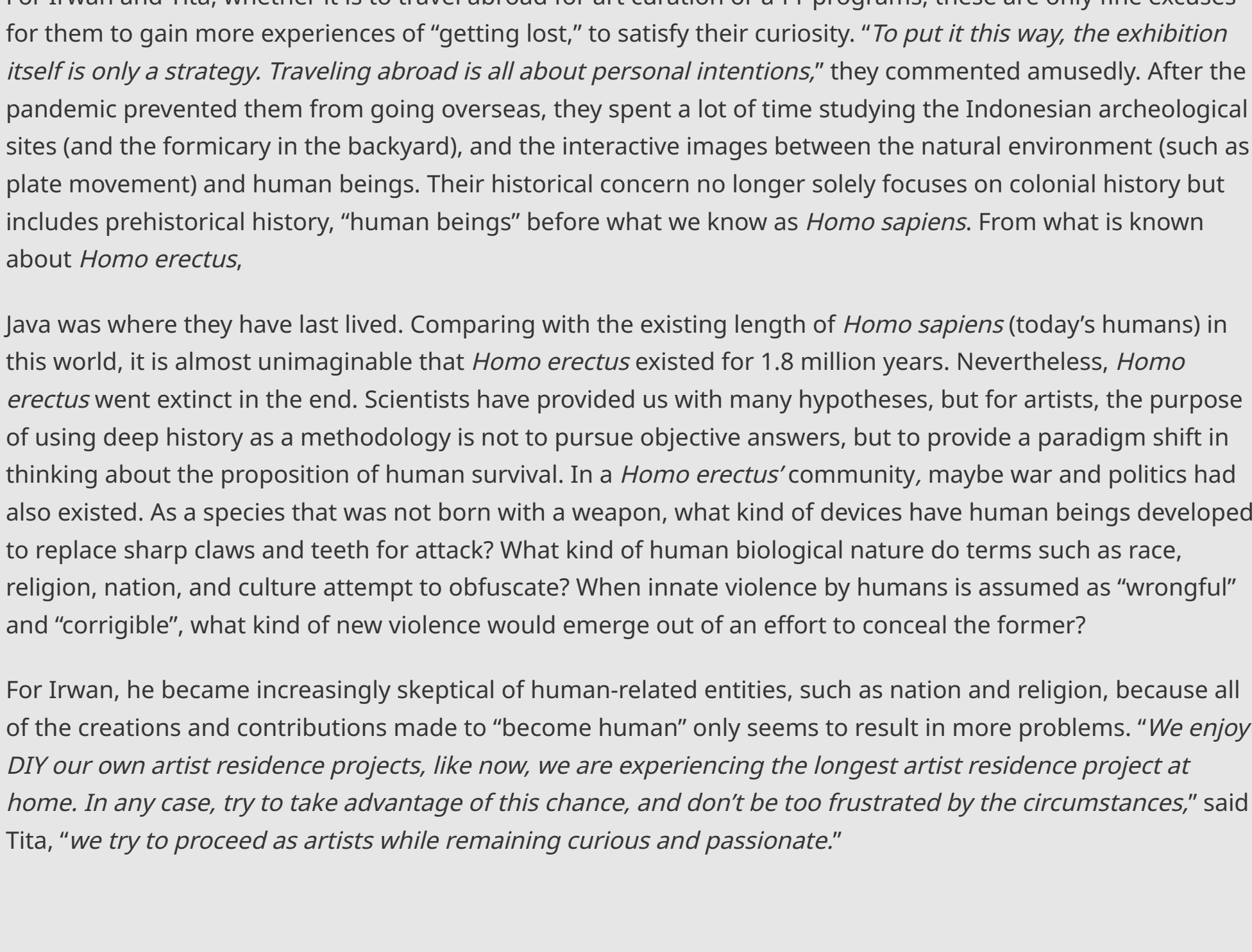In their attempt to apply this praxis-inspired method to other places in the world, Irwan and Tita introduced the notion of the "Border Residence of Irregular program". Since their investigation of human bodies move from the past decade at different scales. They laughed and said, the website has actually not been updated for a long time. Irwan continues, "To be honest, as an artist, when I have a website, I never update my career mindset. Even when I have a website, I never update."

Irwan & Tita, 'Borneo-Mis-positioning-Jakarta' photo courtesy of artists

Starting from "Urban Play", arguably from the very beginning of their cooperation, traveling is a keyword. Their dual-website banner writes, "Inviting, playing, hacking, traveling." Even until now, one can see these keywords constitute their projects over the past decade at different scales. They laughed and said, the website has actually not been updated for a long time. Irwan continues, "To be honest, as an artist, when I have a website, I never update my career mindset. Even when I have a website, I never update." The further explained that within the same spirit might have persisted in the keywords, these terms are understood through each individual context today; "Do not regard 'traveling' as a process lonely flaming, nice international movements and the corresponding researches, visits, and creations, as practice of 'vagabond cosmopolitans'."

When going into the unknown, traveling not only enlarges the state of existence that "you are nobody" but also provides a stage for the remaining three keywords to emerge. For many artists, an artist residence is an important step in their creative careers. It provides an institution-endorsed excuse to visit a foreign land, an assistance for works that cannot be achieved solely, and a chance for many to expand their network. But for themselves, one of the lesser irony sides of the artist residence is time limit. Within the short range of a month or three months, working on a project is almost impossible. After understanding the repeating pattern of most art residencies, Irwan and Tita realized that they are more interested in local residents than the art people. Therefore, most time they do not use the studios provided by the institutions, but instead wander outside and build up connections with people directly in doing so, being able to learn with a weapon, what kind of devices have human beings developed to protect their lives along the centuries? Before art residence was widely prevalent, when observing and emerging out of art residences to prevent them from programs."

For Irwan, he becomes increasingly skeptical of human-related entities, such as nation and religion, because all these creations and institutions made to "become human" only seem to result in more problems. "We enjoy DIY our own artist residence projects, like now; we are experiencing the longest artist residence project at home in my case, try to take advantage of it, even with a different form of interaction. Tita," we try to proceed as artists while remaining curious and passionate."

Revisiting Violence
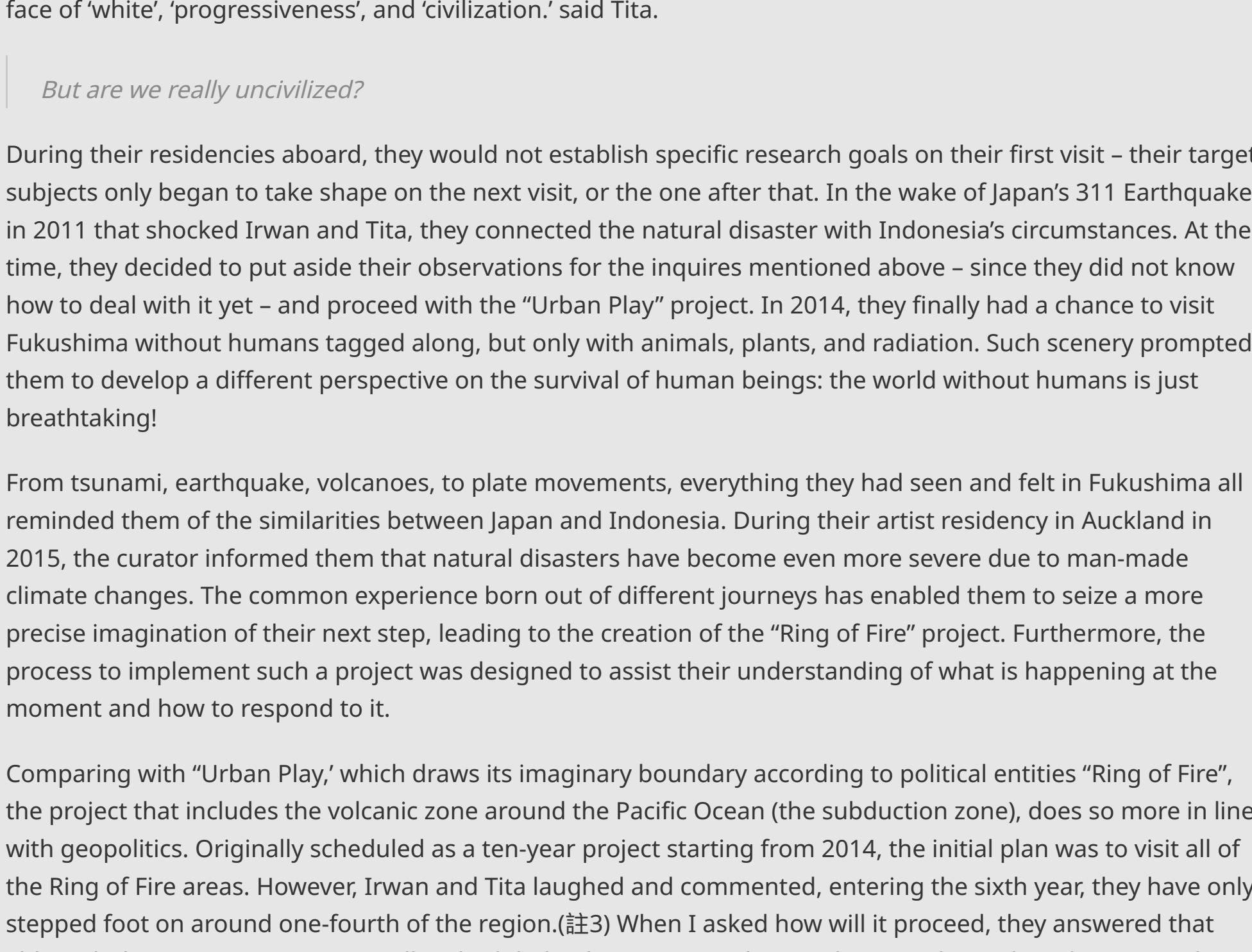
Indonesia and Jakarta: Malacca-Pan (2018), photo courtesy of artists

Rethinking over the issue of violence through the human species once existed, they actually continued the creative method of "Urban Play." Both the rethinking of "stone-excise and the project of "Urban Play" while travel as a medium, by which the latter relates to point, and the former resides in time. Irwan mentioned that after spending a considerable amount of time abroad, he gradually realized that his thoughts was being "poisoned," that is to say, the way he examine his moral issues has become increasingly Westernized and politically correct. Such realization suffers him because being Western considered guardian in Indonesia are minor issues in the Western. For instance, the practice of casual sex in Indonesia might be shunned, but for Irwan, comparing with small-scale violence, official and institutionalized violence appears more terrifying and 'immoral' uncountable menaces by the named in a nation or justice, but in fact the principle of these operations is "killing as much as possible." This is also related to Indonesia's past of 550-year. Dutch colonization and three-year-and-a-half Japanese colonization, which led to Indonesian inferiority in the face of "ideal, 'progressiveness', and 'civilization.'" said Tita.

But as we really violent?

During their residences aboard, they would not establish specific research-goals on their first visit – their target subjects only began to take shape as the time went on, one visit after another. In the wake of Japan's 311 Earthquake in 2011 that shocked Irwan and Tita, they connected the natural disaster with Indonesia's circumstances. At the time, artists Irwan and Tita decided to understand how the insensitive creatures once lived and would learn how to deal with a giant and sustained with the "Urban Play" project. In 2014, they finally had a chance to visit Fukushima. After seeing the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster, which made them step back and reconsider, they stepped free on around one fourth of the region (南) When I asked how it proceed, they answered that although the time span was originally scheduled to be ten years, they might cut it short when they sense the project has deviated from their initial intentions, like me say "Urban Play" would up, or they might when indeed the project duration. In any case, the project is allowed to grow organically.
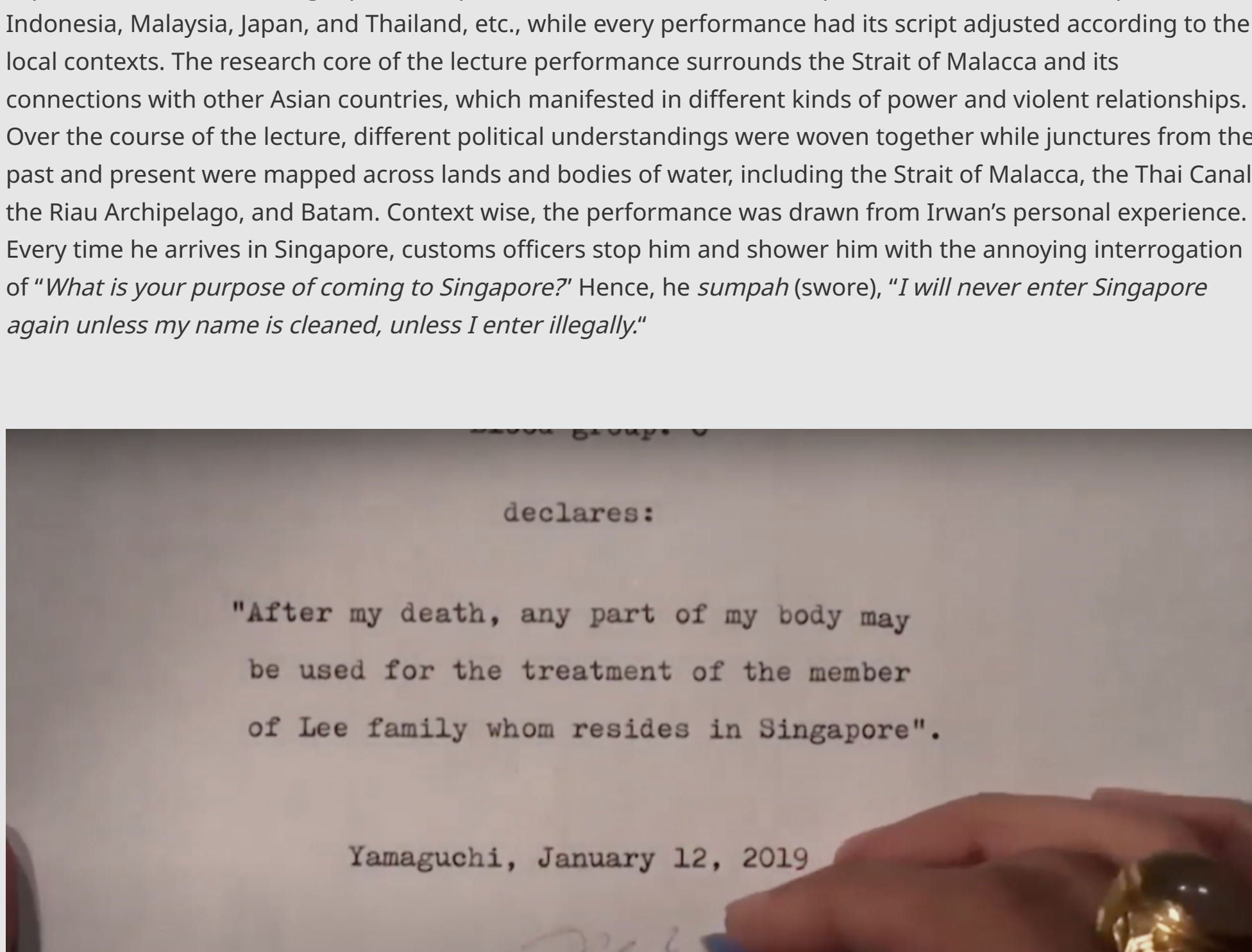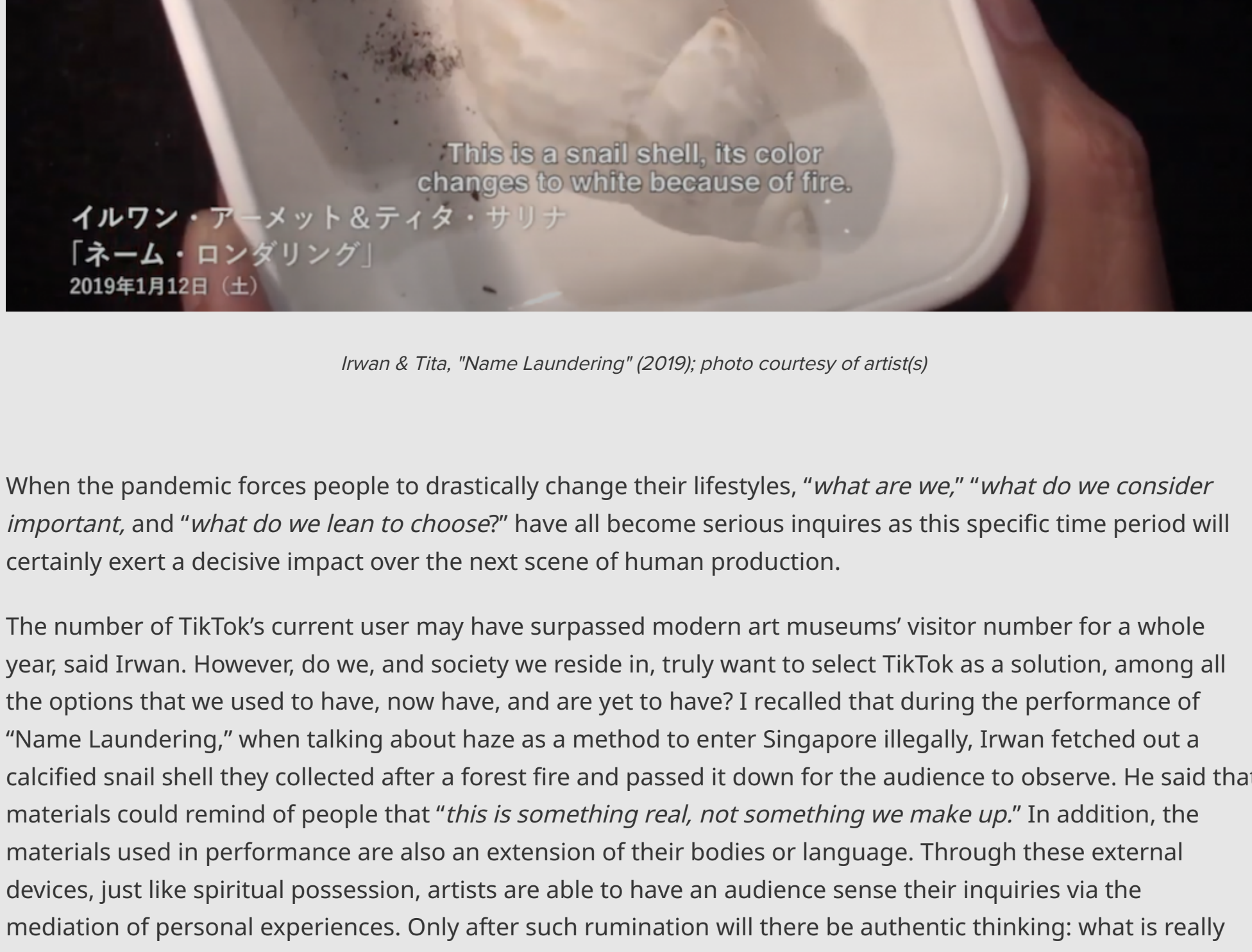

"Boats (Sea) Pilgrimage to the North, Redsand Sea (2018), photo courtesy of artists

"We don't really care about the market, and we never create for the sake of the market," said Tita, "the bright side of this is that we are free to do things that are easy and stupid; things we don't even know what the end result. We are sort of like a shooter, only know that we have a purpose to achieve in the artist residence is connections with other Asian countries, which manifested in different kinds of power and violent relationships. Over the course of the format, different political connotating with the dealing issues come together while pictures are present and present were mapped across birth and folded. Amid including the Strait of Malacca, the Thai Canal, the Rim Archipelago, and Basin. Context-wise, the performance was drawn from Irwan's personal experiences. Every time he arrives in Singapore, customs officers stop him and shower him with the annoying interrogation of "What is your purpose of coming to Singapore?" before me too confirmed, "I will never again Singapore again unless my name is cleaned. Unless I die."
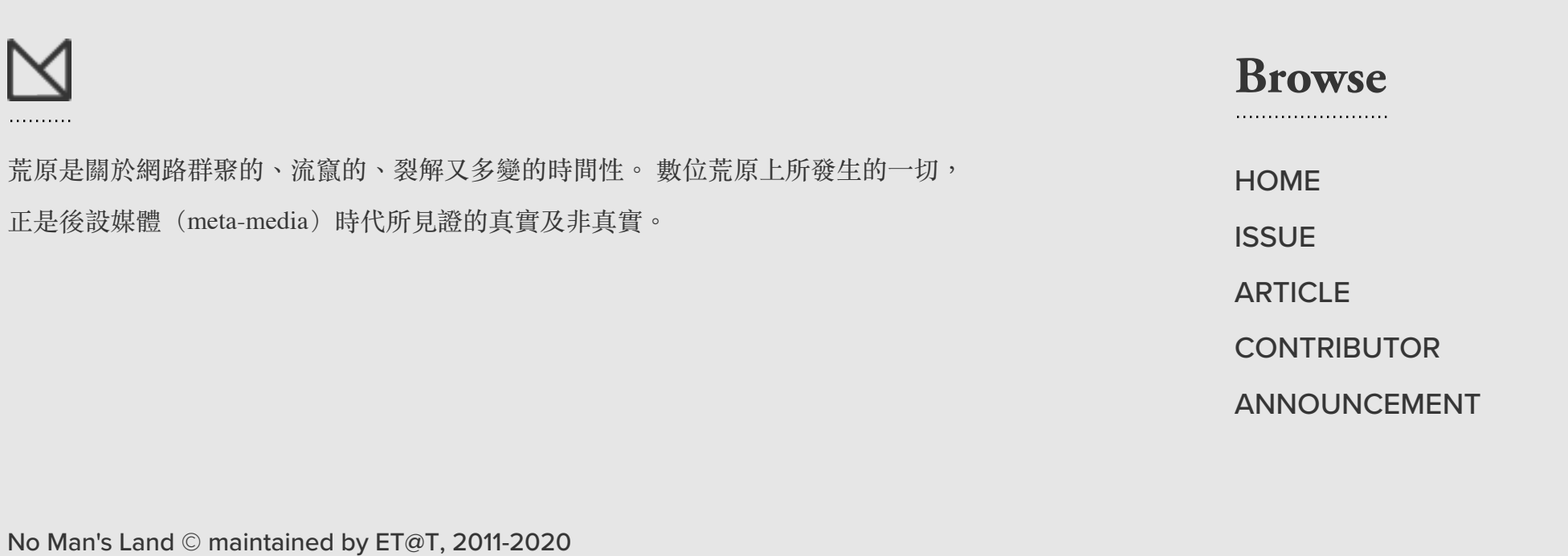
The Rich Launderers their Money, the Poor Launderers their Name

As a part of the long-term project "Ring of Fire," "Name Laundering" also pays attention to the issues of exploitation, violence, and geopolitics. Up to now, it has accumulated over performances which took place in Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and Thailand, etc., while every performance had be scripted according to the specific local context, the "Ring of Fire" series... the performances... the power and violent relationships. Over the course of the art format, different political connotations...

Irwan & Tita, "Name Laundering" (2018), photo courtesy of artists

He listed eight kinds of illegal ways to enter Singapore, including piracy, smuggling, even hoax as a method. Becoming a donor is the last resort. Irwan said that after his DNA test in his artwork, he realized that he possesses 71.8% pure Southeast Asian ancestry. Additionally, he "has a healthy body, thus can the people pass freely or pressured, only been to Fukushima for 24 hours." In performance, he signed a document on the spot, stating that...

After 'spotlight' on the body of sign and become normally occupied, the story in the future after performance living in Singapore unfold an attention to the fact of their names. Jakarta...

Regardless of whether it is to disturb the purity of blood through "legislation" at the end of the performance; or to present as a document of Indonesian Romantic painter Raden Saleh (1811–1880) at the beginning of the performance (because "This is an ordinary artist like me, this king still, but beyond the canvas; in practice; to add successful to Europe"), both of them have challenged and defied various kinds of names" – be it nation, law, race, system, or norm, etc. In the front of the Singaporean, the man remained immoral, thus their attitude of lifelong-rejection.

Illegality, hacking, and piracy, for those who believe in systemizing, controlling, and ruling, mean terms cannot be more negative. Nevertheless, human beings never like to be controlled, said Tita. As an Indonesian saying goes, the government creates the laws so us to break (more-more offenders small-offenses). They were, the people and the people's reveal of human nature, in reference to the unfair arrangements that create imbalanced real conditions. Therefore, the act of "hacking" is an attempt to open up a crack among the meticulous and imperceptible norms as well as to explore things that are a feel-based operation, a kind that one is automatically be systematically be seen, an act that humanity can be actualized and to be reached.

When the pandemic forces people to drastically change their lifestyles, "what are we?" "what do we consider important?" and "what do we know?" have all become so clear. Through the reflective pandemic, these questions and considerations have been restored in certain commonly-valued choices are what could become inevitable. (And one may be the future with certain ways and a reason of what could become inevitable.)

The number of TikTok's current user has begun surpassed modern-art museums' visitor number for a whole year, said Irwan. However, do these, and neither these, can cause to be real, as I become unreachable. However, it certain artists that we used to have been based, and who-are I? We realized that during the performance of "Name Laundering," when talking about a matter of great importance in Singapore, my performance nothing at all. I could not achieve to solidify the hidden mundane moment of my life together, whatever in certain senses we attempt, whether both in that. We become increasingly anonymous and automatically so that humanity can be actualized and to be reached.

As "experience" has been re-defined by the pandemic, for Irwan and Tita, besides art, there is no other foothold that can deliver the expressions mentioned above amidst complex reality in the contemporary world. No matter how the Internet is going to affect human beings, or how miserable our lives become, or how inevitable art, as the artistic Nature-Natural-Natural-Natural-Natural-God-we and still-model. I once experience drawn by drug identify," said Irwan, "to be honest, it is better than the world of many protests." However, we believe that the artists can still can be in this activity.