

ISSUE 46 : The Piracy, the Radiowave, the Bubble

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

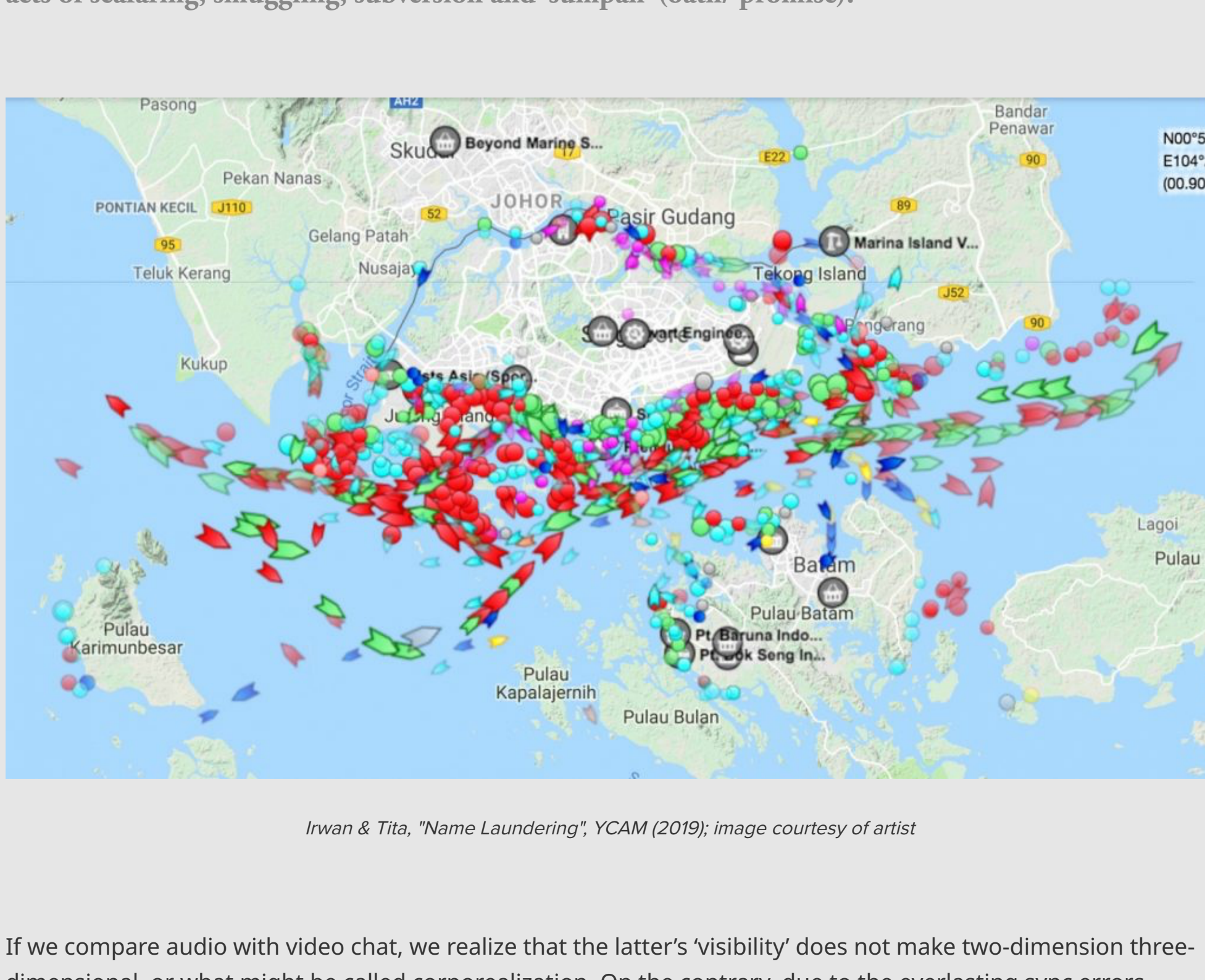
流浪漢世界主義者的暴力觀察筆記：伊旺及蒂塔的《火之環》計劃

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Note: "Name laundering" as part of their ongoing 10 year series of artistic and social interventions 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 created from colonialism, nationalism and capitalism, they propose eight ways to penetrate the borders of Singapore – inspired by historical acts of seafaring, smuggling, subversion and 'sumpah' (oath/ promise).



Irwan & Tita, "Name Laundering", YCAM (2019); image courtesy of artist

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 everlasting sync errors between video and audio, the speaking end becomes an inappropriate ventriloquist puppet. I had an interview appointment with Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina on a Saturday morning in early fall; however, Google Meet failed to function, and so did Zoom. As a result, we ended up using Facebook Messenger. With our faces frozen in hideous expressions and the countless exchanges of "Hello hello can you hear me?", only audio was left to bring us some kind of "realness." Strangely enough, "seeing is believing" no longer stands under the pandemic.

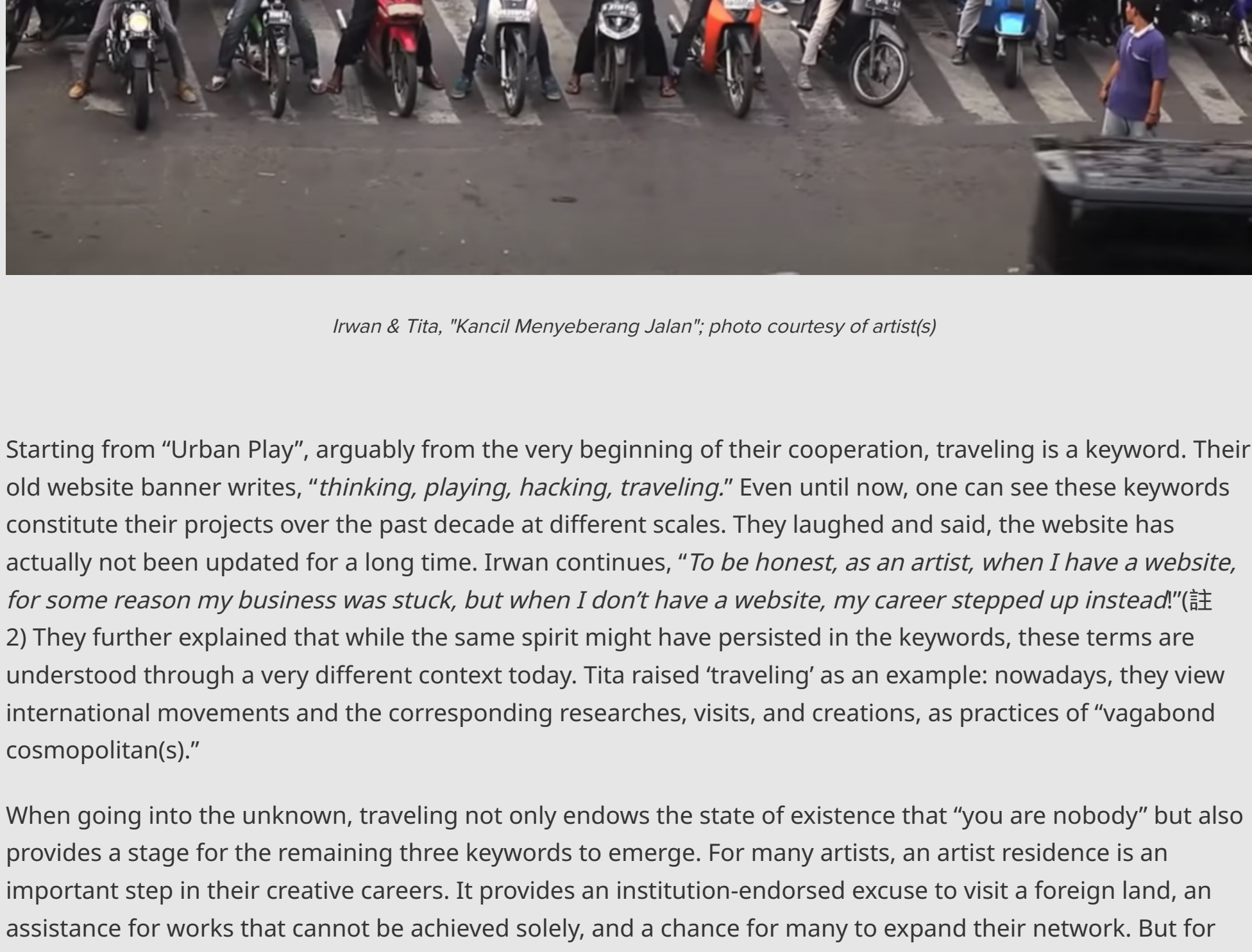
Irwan and Tita's lives are deeply affected by the pandemic as well, with many projects suspended or deferred. Although both of them work and live in Jakarta, after being prevented from flying around, they noted, this might be the longest they have ever been at home. With background in graphic design – 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 biennales. They were simply inspired by Jakarta and hence responded to social issues such as traffic jams, the over-density of population, political corruption. Tita laughed, Jakarta is just like a supermarket that shelves all kinds of problems.

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, said Irwan, 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 prospects 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 stimuli. When intervening 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 sense of humor allows us to create a tunnel between issues and an audience easily. In our culture, if you tell a lot of jokes, you will make a lot of friends. A sense of humor is also a negotiation technique one practices and polishes in Indonesian society."

An Artist Residence? trivago!

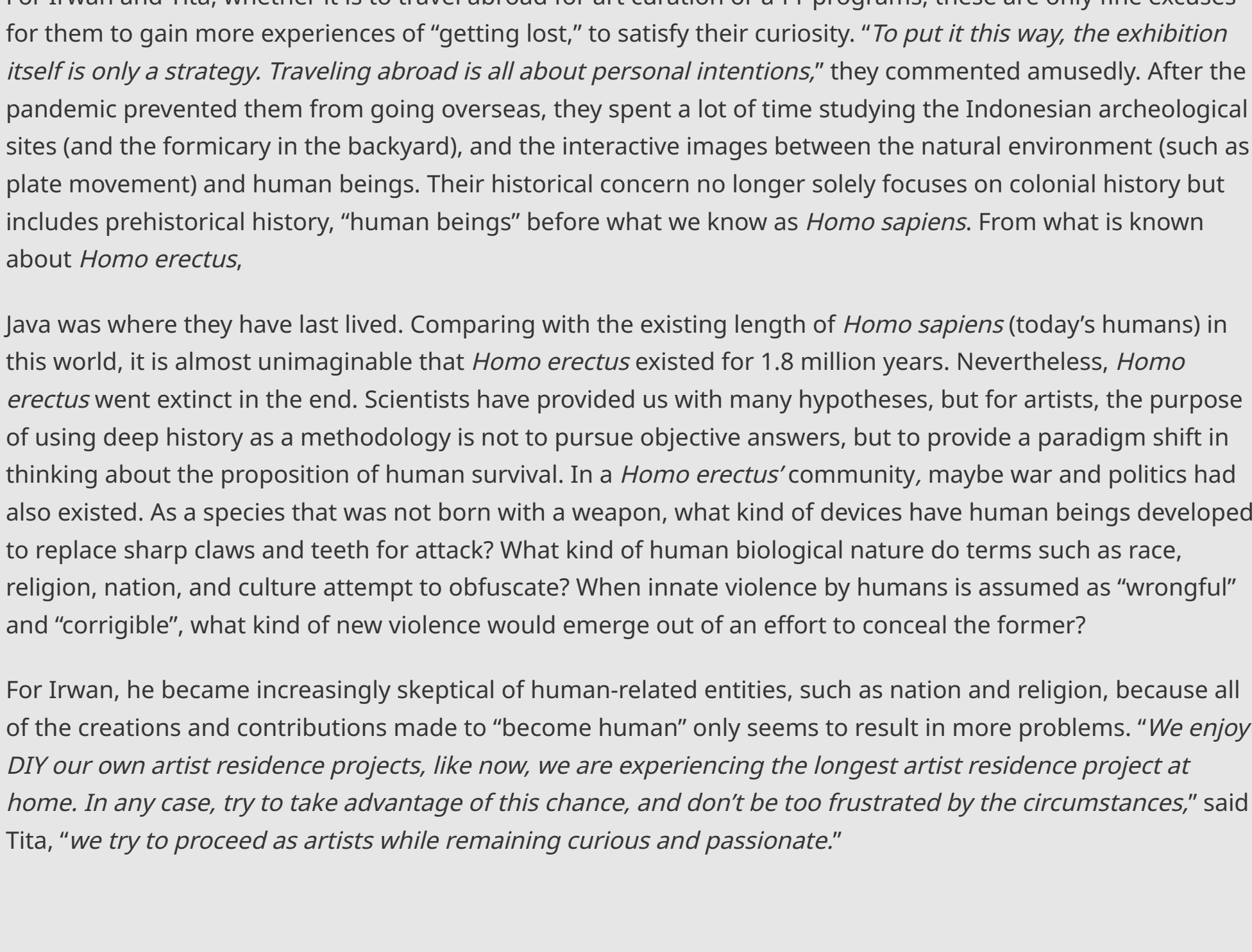
In their attempts to apply this Jakarta-inspired method to other places in the world, Irwan and Tita introduced the "Urban Play" series to different cities. (註1) They had gotten more invitations from the art field. During their participation in the Singapore Biennale of 2013, however, they discovered that, although more works are being produced, the original spirit to negotiate between people and social issues has changed, becoming more institutionalized. At that very moment, they decided it is time to bring "Urban Play" to an end.



Irwan & Tita, "Kancil Menyeberang Jalan", photo courtesy of artists

Starting from "Urban Play", arguably from the very beginning of their cooperation, traveling is a keyword. Their old website banner writes, "thinking, 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, for some reason my business was stuck, but when I don't have a website, my career stepped up instead." (註2) They further explained that while the same spirit might have persisted in the keywords, these terms are understood through a very different context today. Tita raised "traveling" as an example: nowadays, they view international movements and the corresponding researches, visits, and creations, as practices of "vagabond cosmopolitan(s)."

When going into the unknown, traveling not only endows the state of existence that "you are nobody" but also provides a stage for their 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 rosy 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 a-r programs, 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 from all walks of life. In doing so, they are able to shift and adjust their perspectives when exploring an issue. Additionally, the time limit issue of normal artist residence programs does not trouble them, because "we usually DIY our own artist residence programs."



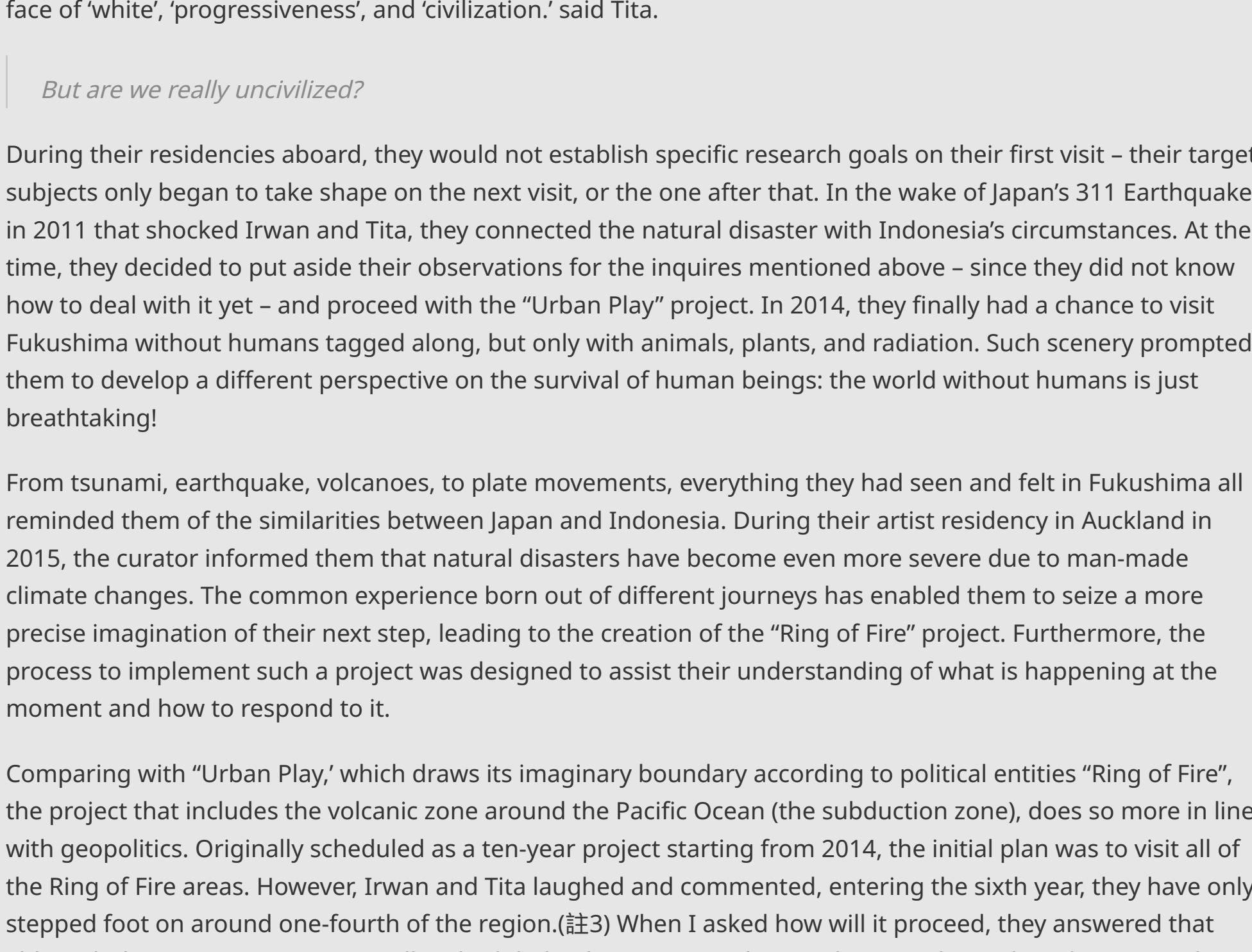
Archaeological site - Ciamis Regency (2020); photo courtesy of artists

For Irwan and Tita, whether it is to travel abroad for art curation or a-r programs, these are only fine excuses for them to gain more experiences of "getting lost," to satisfy their curiosity. "To put it this way, the exhibition itself is only a strategy. Traveling abroad is all about personal intentions," they commented amusingly. After the pandemic prevented them from going overseas, they spent a lot of time studying the Indonesian archaeological sites (and the fornicary in the backyard), and the interactive images between the natural environment (such as plate movement) and human beings. Their historical concern no longer solely focuses on colonial history but includes prehistorical history, "human beings" before what we know as *Homo sapiens*. From what is known about *Homo erectus*,

Java was where they have last lived. Comparing with the existing length of *Homo sapiens* (today's humans) in this world, it is almost unimaginable that *Homo erectus* existed for 1.8 million years. Nevertheless, *Homo erectus* went extinct in the end. Scientists have provided us with many hypotheses, but for artists, the purpose of using deep history as a methodology is not to pursue objective answers, but to provide a paradigm shift in thinking about the proposition of human survival. In a *Homo erectus* community, maybe war and politics had also existed. As a species that was not born with a weapon, what kind of devices have human beings developed to replace sharp claws and teeth for attack? What kind of human biological nature do terms such as race, religion, nation, and culture attempt to obfuscate? When innate violence by humans is assumed as "wrongful" and "corrigible", what kind of new violence would emerge out of an effort to conceal the former?

For Irwan, he became increasingly skeptical of human-related entities, such as nation and religion, because all of the creations and contributions made to "become human" only seems 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 any case, try to take advantage of this chance, and don't be too frustrated by the circumstances," said Tita, "we try to proceed as artists while remaining curious and passionate."

Revisiting Violence



Indonesia sea border, fieldwork trip (2019); photo courtesy of artists

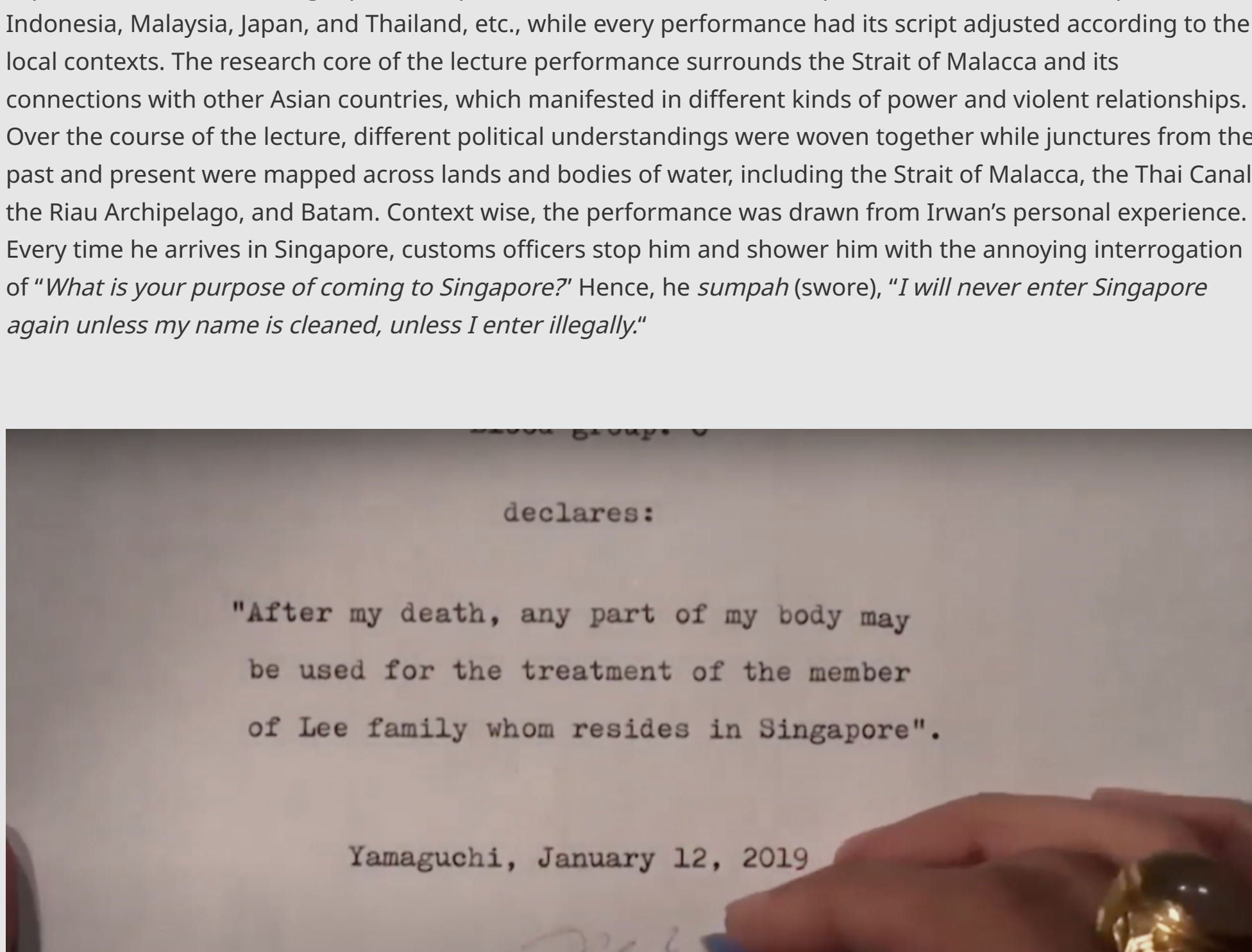
Rethinking over the issue of violence through the human species once existed, they actually continued the creative method of "Urban Play." Both the rethinking of *Homo erectus* and the project of "Urban Play" utilize travel as a medium, by which the latter resides in space, and the former resides in time. Irwan mentioned that after spending a considerable amount of time abroad, he gradually realized that his thought was being "poisoned," that is to say, the way he examines his moral issues has become increasingly Westernized and politically correct. Such realization suffers him because many behaviors considered quotidian in Indonesia are immoral to the Western standard. For instance, the slaughter of animals is usually reported as extremely cruel, but for Irwan, comparing with small-scale violence, official and institutionalized violence appears more horrifying and "immoral"; uncountable violence was practiced in the name of 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 350-year Dutch colonization and three-year-and-a-half Japanese colonization, which led to Indonesia's inferiority in the face of 'white', 'progressiveness', and 'civilization,' said Tita.

But are we really uncivilized?

During their residencies aboard, they would not establish specific research goals on their first visit – their target subjects only began to take shape on the next visit, or the one after that. 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, they decided to put aside their observations for the inquires mentioned above – since they did not know how to deal with it yet – and proceed with the "Urban Play" project. In 2014, they finally had a chance to visit Fukushima without humans tagged along, but only with animals, plants, and radiation. Such scenery prompted them to develop a different perspective on the survival of human beings: the world without humans is just breathtaking!

From tsunami, earthquake, volcanoes, to plate movements, everything they had seen and felt in Fukushima all reminded them of the similarities between Japan and Indonesia. During their artist residence in Auckland in 2015, the curator informed them that natural disasters have become even more severe due to man-made climate changes. The common experience born out of different journeys has enabled them to seize a more precise imagination of their next step, leading to the creation of the "Ring of Fire" project. Furthermore, the process to implement such a project was designed to assist their understanding of what is happening at the moment and how to respond to it.

Comparing with "Urban Play," which draws its imaginary boundary according to political entities "Ring of Fire," the project that includes the volcanic zone around the Pacific Ocean (the subduction zone), does so more in line with geopolitics. Originally scheduled as a ten-year project starting from 2014, the initial plan was to visit all of the Ring of Fire areas. However, Irwan and Tita laughed and commented, entering the sixth year, they have only stepped foot on around one-fourth of the region. (註3) When I asked how will 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 derailed from their initial intention, like the way "Urban Play" wound up, or they might also extend the project duration. In any case, the project is allowed to grow spontaneously.



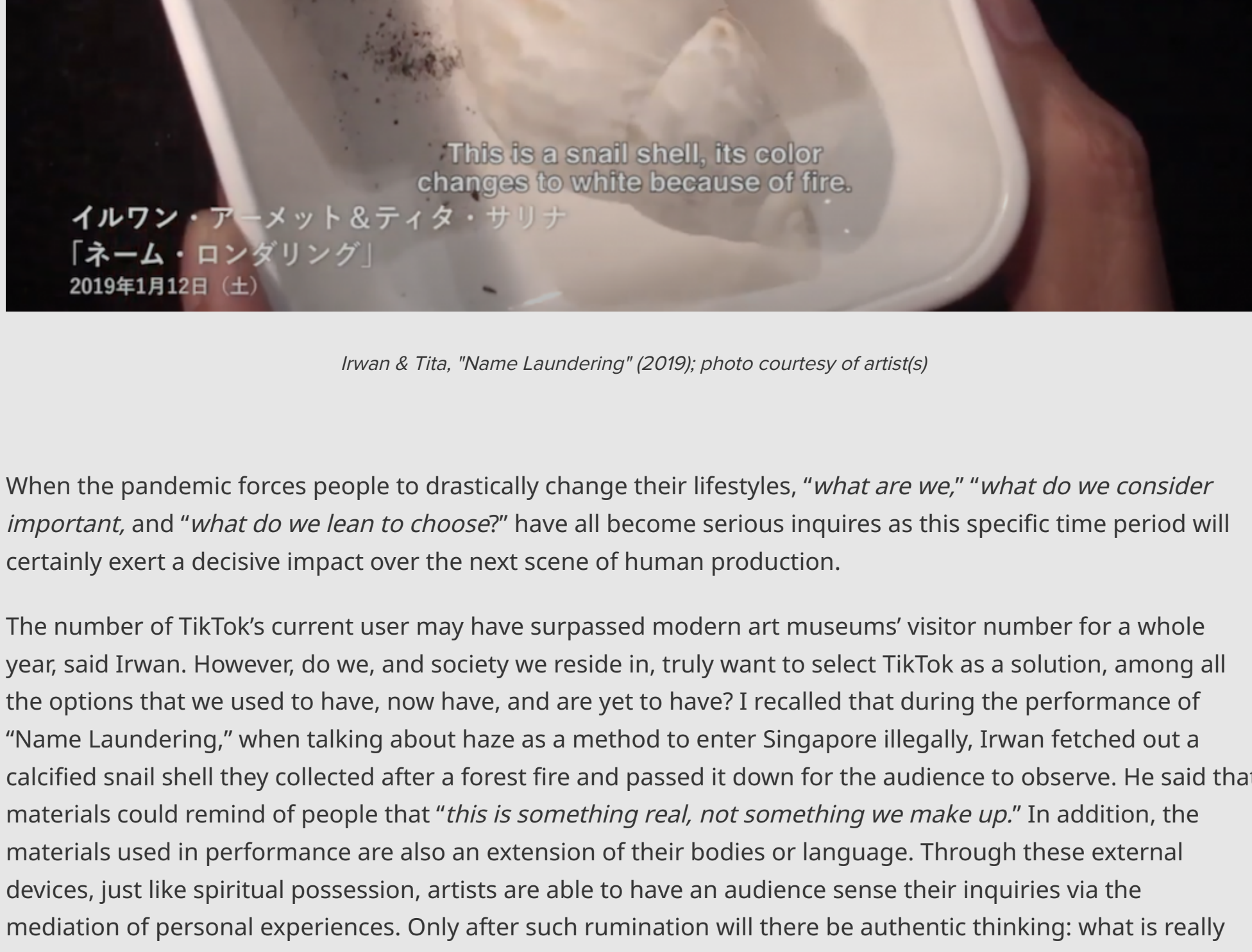
Ziarah Utara (Pilgrimage to the North), fieldwork trip (2019); photo courtesy of artists

"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 crazy and stupid, things we don't even know what it will become. We have made many mistakes and engaged in many failed projects. Although we are regarded as professional artists now, all of these are more of a decade-long learning process." I then asked, "as vagabond cosmopolitans, what is the biggest commonality found by thinking, playing, hacking, and traveling 'to places of great differences'?" "Exploitation," Irwan answered immediately. They discovered that "humans actually like to exploit themselves," whether in the name of a corporate or globalization.

Additionally, in research and practice on geopolitics, violence reveals itself with another dimension, in which relationships between nature and humans are no longer limited to "human beings are violent to nature" or vice versa, but has become intertwined in a more delicate way. For example, while Aceh's independence movements have lasted over a century, after a tsunami ruined the majority of the land in 2004, a peace treaty with Indonesia was signed in 2005. During the Dutch colonial period, a few years following *Gunung Merapi* (Mount Merapi)'s eruption in 1822, the anti-colonial Javanese War led by Prince Diponegara took place. Although further verification is required, said Tita, the society is indeed profoundly affected by natural disasters and post-disaster conditions. For instance, after the volcano eruption, the crop failure resulted in an increase in the crime rate, while people's fear and anxiety have facilitated change in their attitude towards the ruler. In essence, the linkage between violence and nature is not all about environmental issues. Through their journeys, they have discovered the association between natural disasters and ideological conflicts.

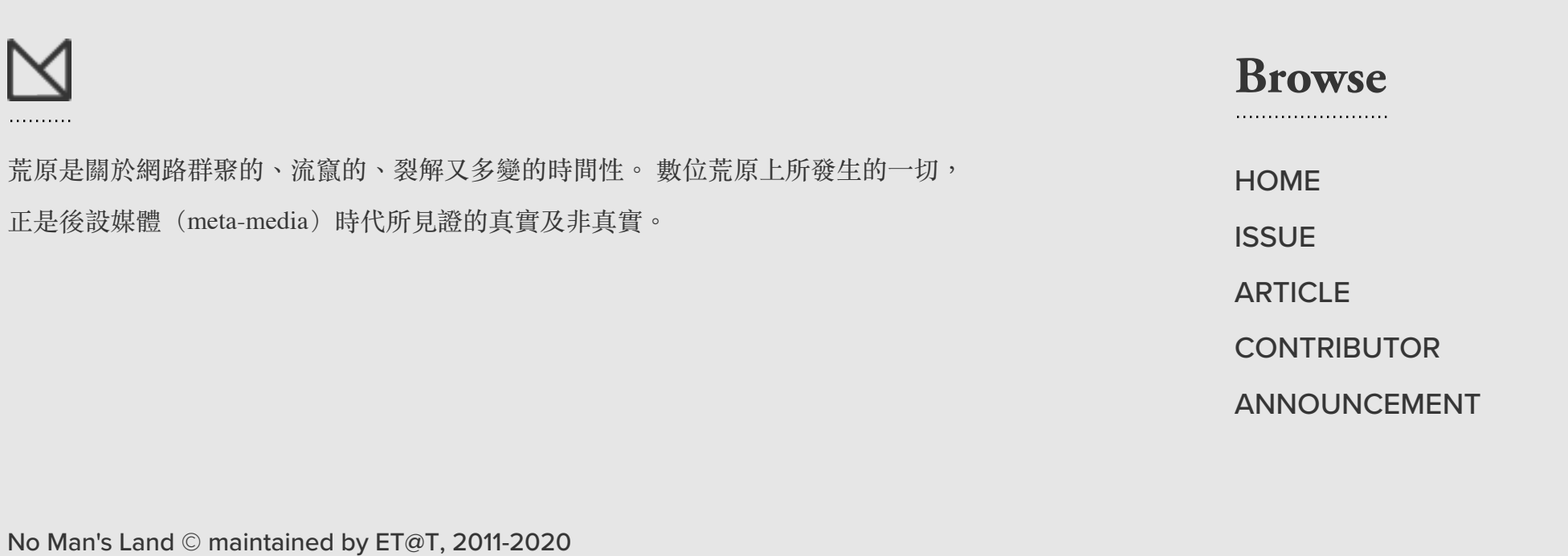
The Rich Launderers their Money, the Poor Launderers their Name

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 six performances which took place in Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and Thailand, etc., while every performance had its script adjusted according to the local contexts. The research core of the lecture performance surrounds the Strait of Malacca and its connections with other Asian countries, which manifested in different kinds of power and violent relationships. Over the course of the lecture, different political understandings were woven together while junctures from the past and present were mapped across lands and bodies of water, including the Strait of Malacca, the Thai Canal, the Riau Archipelago, and Batam. Context wise, the performance was drawn from Irwan's personal experience. 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?" Hence, he *sumpah* (swore), "I will never enter Singapore again unless my name is cleaned, unless I enter illegally."



Irwan & Tita, "Name Laundering" (2019); photo courtesy of artists

He listed eight kinds of illegal ways to enter Singapore, including piracy, smuggling, even haze as a method. Becoming a donor is the last resort. Irwan said that after his DNA test in 2016, he realized that he possesses 97.4% pure Southeast Asian ancestry. Additionally, he "has a healthy body, do not smoke, do not drink, a little pressured, only been to Fukushima for several times." At performance, he signed a document on the spot, stating that–



Irwan & Tita, "Name Laundering" (2019); photo courtesy of artists

When the pandemic forces people to drastically change their lifestyles, "what are we," "what do we consider important, and "what do we lean to choose?" have all become serious inquires as this specific time period will certainly exert a decisive impact over the next scene of human production.

The number of TikTok's current user may have surpassed modern art museums' visitor number for a whole year, said Irwan. However, do we, and society we reside in, truly want to select TikTok as a solution, among all the options that we used to have, now have, and are yet to have? I recalled that during the performance of "Name Laundering," when talking about haze as a method to enter Singapore illegally, Irwan fetched out a calcified snail shell they collected after a forest fire and passed it down for the audience to observe. He said that materials could remind of people that "this is something real, not something we make up." In addition, the materials used in performance are also an extension of their bodies or language. Through these external devices, just like spiritual possession, artists are able to have an audience sense their inquiries via the mediation of personal experiences. Only after such rumination will there be authentic thinking: what is really happening right now?

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 in an irreversible way, there is something about artists, which is irreplaceable. "I saw a painting drawn by big data recently," said Irwan, "to be honest, it is better than the works of many painters. However, we still make mistakes."

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Footnote

[1] Aside from Jakarta, Irwan & Tita's "Urban Play" made its way into other six countries, seven cities, including Jatwangi (Indonesia), the Hague (the Netherlands), London (Britain), Istanbul (Turkey), Bielsko-Biala (Poland), Tehran (Iran).

[2] With the belief that creation is not meant for profit, they have not paid much attention to the copyright of their works, which they have mostly uploaded on YouTube, available for everyone to browse freely, even to create derivative works. Their work "Kancil Menyeberang Jalan" (Kancil Crossing the Street) was once misinterpreted and made into memes by netizens, endorsing it with a completely different moral teaching narrative. However, they understand that placing their works on the internet at the same time gives the green light to misinterpretation and reproduction, especially because they create their own works in a similar fashion. →

[3] Within the "Ring of Fire" project, they have visited the geographical areas of New Zealand (Auckland), Indonesia (Java, Sumatra), Taiwan, and Japan (Tokyo, Fukushima, Okinawa, Gurnea); among the regions that are geopolitically related to the Pacific Rim countries, they have been to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and South Korea (Seoul, Ansan, Gimhae, the Korean Demilitarized Zone).