

00:00 – 04:00

Kerrine: Hello and welcome to another podcast hosted by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF. I am Kerrine and I manage the activities of culture360 and I'm the host for today's episode.

So I'm very thrilled to introduce our guest for today, Theodora Agni. And Agni is an independent arts manager based in Yogyakarta, in Indonesia and she has extensive experience working with public and private arts institutions in Indonesia. And she was just telling me before the recording of this podcast that she just wrapped up a huge festival in August in Indonesia as well, and there's an upcoming exhibition that's coming up in December. So many exciting works in the making for Agni. And more recently, Agni has also helped us with updating the Mobility Funding Guide for Indonesia.

So if you've been tuning in to our previous podcasts, you would know that we've had conversations with Sharmilla and Xiaoyi and we've centered our episodes around updates to the Mobility Guides for ASEAN and China.

So today we're traveling to Indonesia, and Agni will share with us her insights on cultural mobility opportunities in Indonesia. Welcome to the podcast Agni.

Agni: Hello. Hi Kerrine, hi everyone, thank you for having me on this podcast. My name is Theodora Agni and you can call me Agni. As a little bit of an addition to the introduction that has been prepared by Kerrine, I'd like to introduce myself again.

I am an arts manager based in Jogja, Indonesia. And after spending several years working for one of the oldest art spaces in Indonesia, I started working independently in 2019 to develop my personal practice and interest in the politics of care and invisible labour in the arts. I manage art residencies, support artistic research, organise community engagement, produce exhibitions, events and publications.

And for the past three years, I have been working as one of the programme coordinators for a mega festival called [Indonesia Bertutur](#), organised by the Directorate of Film, Music and Media, of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of Indonesia. So related to the cultural mobility, which is the main topic for today, I think I believe that cultural exchange and mobility are crucial for artmaking because they enable artists and cultural workers to travel, seek inspiration, share ideas and develop new initiatives that enrich our artistic practices.

So encountering with different cultures can spark creativity and freshen up the local arts scene. And for artists and arts managers like myself, I think cultural mobility is not just a professional asset but also a way to stimulate local economies and contribute to sustainable development.

With the numerous local cultural festivals and international arts residencies that are happening in Jogja, this dynamic flow of people and ideas supports both the local economy and the broader cultural landscape.

04:01 – 08:52

Kerrine: That's a very nice introduction to what Agni does and also her take on what cultural mobility means to her. So maybe with that, we could dive straight into what's happening in

Indonesia right now. Maybe you could explain or describe a little bit more on what's happening or how Indonesia's creative community is like? And after the pandemic and with all that changes in politics and the things that are going on right now, how has the funding landscape also evolved with all of these changes?

Agni: in my experience, the arts and cultural scene in Indonesia is currently experiencing significant growth, due to the increase of the government support for the arts activities and cultural mobility, especially since the Indonesian government passed the [law on the Development of Culture](#) in 2017. That is also followed by the establishment of the Cultural Sector Facilitation Programme in 2020 and the [Cultural Endowment Fund in 2022](#).

So then, after that, the local art community is then becoming more active in initiating art projects and participating in international events that had been on hold due to the pandemic. However, it's also worth noting that the arts and cultural sector in Indonesia, like in many Southeast Asian countries, still rely heavily on external funding from international institutions and foreign cultural organisations.

So this dependence became more apparent during the pandemic, which forced many arts projects and cultural exchanges to move online or to come to a halt. Travel restriction and the reallocation of public funds from the arts to the health sector to tackle the pandemic played a significant role in this shift.

So despite these challenges, the support from the Indonesian government is helping to reduce this dependency on external funding. One of the good things about the new programmes is, it is open to all kinds of creative practices and projects as long as the focus is on the arts and cultural sector. But also it is important to note that these opportunities are currently available only to Indonesian citizens.

And even with the government support to push the cultural mobility without geographical limits, most travel still tends to be towards countries in the global North, I see this trend through my work as a residency manager.

So back in the early 2000s, when residencies were becoming popular as a way for artists to conduct research and develop their works, European countries, especially the Netherlands and Germany, were top destinations for Indonesian artists because these countries have well established residency programs like. Excuse me if my spelling is wrong, like the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Cité internationale des arts in Paris, Delfina Foundation in London and IASPIS in Stockholm. So the rise in international travel and the ease of online communication at this, at the moment made this option more accessible. So many artists then travel more to these countries. But these days, there is a noticeable shift among the artists and researchers, curators and cultural workers, that they are now looking to connect and collaborate within the region.

So, like a recent example of this connection is the [Connecting South](#) project.

Kerrine: The Cambodian Living Arts one?

Agni: Yeah, that was started in 2020 as an initiative to set up a fellowship program for cultural workers and creative practitioners from Africa and Asia Pacific.

08:53 – 10:57

Kerrine: Yes that's very interesting insights actually, because I never knew that Netherlands and Germany were one of the top destinations that Indonesians actually liked to travel to. So that's very refreshing for me to hear. And I think it's also a good sign that more people are wanting to connect and collaborate within the region, because I think within Asia and within Southeast Asia, we have a lot to offer so it's always good to tap within our network.

I'm also wondering in terms of who the main mobility funders are right now in Indonesia. I know we talked a lot about how the government is one of the main funders. I'm also thinking if there are any smaller mobility funders or maybe independent mobility funders that are around in Indonesia?

Agni: I think this is also related to what I mentioned earlier. That the Indonesian arts scene have dependencies to foreign funding. So in my experience, there are no like smaller funding or independent funding because like. I mean if we throw back in the 90s, how the art communities have been surviving. Because at the time, also the artistic practice was very much related to the political field during the New Order regime.

Artists would prefer to be independent, away from any government agenda and also government support. So also in the same time, artists are also exploring different ways to promote their work and build their own market for the work.

From that, I think like most of the funding, the financing of the art activities and cultural mobilities are mostly international cultural institutions like French cultural center for example, or the Goethe Institut or like other international cultural centers that has offices in Indonesia.

10:58 – 15:24

Kerrine: I agree, I think that's a very common trend that we see in Southeast Asia, that we are very dependent on foreign funding unfortunately. There are these available funds that come from elsewhere to us, so we then tap on all of these opportunities.

So I also wanted to expand a little bit more on that question. How have the types of mobility support actually evolved over time, in response to the needs of artists and cultural professionals across different disciplines in Indonesia? So for instance, are arts residency opportunities more, more supported and whether one art form, one discipline is more supported than the other?

Agni: In my view, the evolution or the development of mobility support in Indonesia reflects a wider trend that relates to a more diverse approach in facilitating international engagement and professional developments for artists and cultural workers. Like what I mentioned back then, in the 1980s until 1990s, support for cultural mobility was mainly focused on preserving traditional arts and promoting Indonesian culture abroad.

This kind of support was largely organised at the government level through the Indonesian Embassy and often involved traditional dancers or performing artists participating in international festivals and exchange programmes. Since the early 2000s, with the growing interest in Indonesian contemporary art, which was partly driven by the second art market boom in 2007, Indonesian artists and curators have become increasingly active in the global art scene. And this

also has led to more international art exhibitions and residencies and noticeable rise in the foreign support for local art activities and cultural mobility.

There has been a significant increase in the number and variety of artist residencies and exchange programmes both within Indonesia and internationally. So these programmes then become more structured and designed to facilitate different artistic disciplines. Like for example, Cemeti Art House, which is now, Cemeti Institute for Art and Society. As one of the oldest art spaces in Jogja, it has been running its residency programme since 2007 and continues to be a prominent platform for artists.

And today, it seems to me that opportunities like residencies and scholarships are particularly valued by artists and cultural workers. And I think this is related to the social and political nature of contemporary art making in Indonesia, which often involves community based projects and collaborative efforts. So these opportunities help artists to engage with global networks and gain professional development, which is crucial in a field that increasingly intersects with social issues.

And like what Kerrine mentioned about the disciplines or artforms that is more supported than others, I think, despite the increase in available opportunities and supports, the field of artmaking continues to be the most desirable and well supported compared to other disciplines or practices. Like professional development for non-artistic roles for example, like the art handlers, administrators and arts managers still receive less attention and support.

So this gap I think, highlights the ongoing need for a more balanced approach to professional development across all areas of the art sector.

15:25 – 18:26

Kerrine: I completely agree that opportunities for arts managers like myself, or maybe even you. I always find that whenever I organise events or platforms or activities for other people, but I don't seem to get that many opportunities as well. And I would love to have such opportunities available. So I do agree that yes, it is a gap that we haven't quite realised much about because there's always so much attention on the people who make art.

Kerrine: So if I'm going on to talking about the mobility guides itself, what were some of the challenges that you faced when you were updating the guides? I know that one of the many issues that we had was also the accessibility and the availability of information. And I'm also wondering if there were any other challenges that you came across.

Agni: It was fun but also challenging for me. I'm now recalling all the memories, I think.

Kerrine: I hope they were good memories.

Agni: I think one of the challenges difficult to navigate is that some grant programmes are no longer available due to various reasons. Like the shifting in focus, whether it's structural, institutional or like geopolitical. Like for example, Arts Collaboratory, that used to be a funding organisation, now has transformed into a trans local ecosystem, where in this new model, the funds are allocated as institutional grants and the collective pot for activities among the member organisations.

For example, some institutions like the British Council, making a new exchange programme, in the same time discontinued the old grant program. So I think that's one of the challenges I think important to note. And also, like kind of giving us a story of how or like, phenomenon where the connection between countries can be either developed or changing over time.

So other than that, the other challenges are more like technical issues, such as the hacked website or expired domain names. But then it's also important because many organisations rely heavily on their website as their communication platform.

Like mostly the well-established or old organisations. So it has been difficult then to find alternative resource, or source of information about the grant programme because that's the only communication platform that they use.

18:27 – 19:25

Kerrine: I'm also wondering, aside from websites, because like we mentioned, the websites tend to not be as updated as we would like them to be. Within Indonesia itself, are there other platforms that you use or other arts practitioners use to get their information about grants, or is it usually through word of mouth, like I hear from someone?

Agni: Actually there are many ways. Like the most common is through WhatsApp and also from Instagram. I think Instagram is the most popular platform for information in Indonesia.

The open call that is ongoing now, the [Cultivate Programme in Bangkok](#) was also spread out through Instagram. Like the Ministry of Education and Culture is also using Instagram to publish their open call. I think in Indonesia, Instagram is the top platform.

19:26 – 23:38

Kerrine: Interesting that Instagram and social media is one of the top few sources where we get our information from. So websites are not the only places to get, what you need to know. Finally, if I could just round off this conversation, what would you say are some of your biggest learnings, biggest takeaways about the funding system in Indonesia after undertaking this piece of research?

Agni: I think this is a very interesting question because as an art manager, I work with both international and local government funding for some projects.

So after taking this research, the first thing that stands out for me is the need to adapt reporting requirements for the funding system in Indonesia. When dealing with the Indonesian government funding, usually the reporting requirements tend to be very administrative. It's all about complying with government regulations and budget controls, where that means detailed expenditure reports and proof that funds have been used according to the approved budget.

So then, compared to the international funders such as foundations and organisations because their focus is on narrative report. It is enough to just submit like a comprehensive documentation of how the funds were used, the outcomes of the projects, or challenges that we encounter. From this comparison, I think the Indonesian funding system needs to catch up with the diverse and often informal ways in which artists and cultural workers operate. Because unlike the other public sectors that follow strict auditing principles, the arts of course, are more dynamic and unconventional.

So the system should be more flexible to recognise and to support this uniqueness of artists and cultural workers. So this ideally should include like streamlining application procedures, reducing the bureaucratic barriers, providing support that reflects the creative and often informal nature of artistic work.

Another takeaway is the importance of involving the local private sector in supporting the arts because like, like what we discussed, there are changes and also this led to unpredictability. So given the unpredictable nature of funding in Indonesia, I think corporate sponsorship and private donations are essential for filling the gaps that is left by the public funding. Like the shifts in government priorities and economic changes can create challenges for long term planning and sustainability, because then artists and arts organisations may struggle to secure reliable financial support. So involvement of the local private sector can bring additional resources for specific projects, exhibitions and initiatives that can help raise the visibility of the Indonesian arts.

Kerrine: So thank you for sharing with us your thoughts and insights on culture mobility in Indonesia. I think I've learned a lot and it's been a pleasure having you on the podcast. And to our listeners, thank you for listening. We hope you have enjoyed this conversation with Agni. Please stay tuned for the second part of this podcast, where we will continue the conversations with Agni on the topic of travel, cultural mobility and environmental sustainability in Indonesia.