

# Art and activism in 'paradise'



Jaco van Schalkwyk with Indonesian painter Vincent Chandra

The final Gong Laut Festival stage

The scorching sun burns the dusty field in front of the Manik Bumi Foundation in Lovina Beach, a suburb of Singaraja in the north of Bali. This barren corner near the brown, sandy beach, which is popular with locals, will be the space for our final Gong Laut Festival performance – one that is meant to be a wake-up call to address our passionate concern for the state of our oceans and our planet.

The Manik Bumi Foundation was founded by Balinese Juli Wirahmini in her hometown to create awareness and to create community creativity related to the ecological and environmental challenges the island of Bali suffers from. Juli is a powerhouse and has been running an annual Indonesian cultural festival in Hamburg in Germany for many years. It is her passion for her home island that drives the Gong Laut Festival, which was created as a platform for activism and arts that deal with ecological challenges, to share and create new ideas. While this year's festival was the first and it is still an experiment, it is a learning experience and will inform those that follow, hopefully leading to constant improvement and prosperity.

The launch of the Gong Laut Festival also marks the inauguration of the new headquarters of Juli Wirahmini's foundation – a beautiful mix of modern architecture with old Balinese building traditions. Huge glass doors invite the surrounding nature in while also providing much-needed

airflow in very hot Bali. When we arrive from South Africa to install our group show *Beyond troubled water(s)* in two of the upper rooms, there is still so much building activity around us that we cannot fathom that this dusty field between the house and the seaside will be home to the big festival in a week's time.

Our art show is one part of the programme. We connect with Indonesian artist Made Bayak, who creates sculptures and paintings using plastic he collects from beaches and the ocean. He is one of Indonesia's most famous artists and he exhibits his work extensively internationally. This is an important encounter and we converse with him about the purpose and limitations of the arts when it comes to political and social awareness. He is a tireless advocate of the ocean and often works with schools and university students to build more knowledge about ecological matters to make them part of today's art practices.

These informal encounters enrich us all enormously but, it has to be said, there was unfortunately not enough room for such conversations at the festival as the Indonesian and German chief curators were too engaged in organisational issues to make the effort to connect artists, poets and activists effectively.

Here in Bali, it feels like there is no time to waste anymore. There is plastic everywhere and we join the school kids who are busy collecting rubbish from the beach next to

the Manik Bumi Foundation. It is a sad experience. As soon as I put one item in my trash bag, another ten are washed ashore – a modern Sisyphean task. There is comfort in the practicality of this connection with reality though, which is highly appreciated after having spent some days with a particular group of international poets who were also part of the festival.

These poets have their own agenda, and their narcissistic neediness to be heard is ridiculously juxtaposed against the needs of a nature in destruction. The ocean we visit is suffering silently while its fish and corals are dying under the surface beyond which we seldom look. The poets' concern is the run-of-the-mill 'the ocean connects us all', which they repeat like a mantra. And I consider why, in this company, it sounds rather like lip service than a 'gong', a wake-up call to embark on the necessary transformation of our perceptions and, more importantly, our behaviours.

As the Manik Bumi Foundation engages in practical ways to change environmental issues and also takes teaching very seriously, the Undiksha University of Singaraja is our partner institution during the festival. Thankfully so. Indonesia has a very young population and we take part in a lot of workshops and discussions with the amazingly informed and passionate students, and the versatile and knowledgeable staff. This is the future and these young people are very much aware of the challenges they face, and what kind of a world we will bequeath them.

American poet Carolyn Forché is a positive example of how to connect arts and activism. A human rights advocate and brilliant poet, she is the director of the Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice at Georgetown University, which is a literary, critical, and pedagogical undertaking devoted to the situation of poetry and poetics in the contemporary world and very much connects it with social practices. Her conversation with Helga Trüpel, a founder of the Green Party in Germany and now a member of the European Parliament, was one of the highlights of these university workshops. Both were impressed by the dedication of these young people whose awareness of the ecological disaster in their midst is much greater than in any of the Western countries whose rubbish and lifestyle are still the main culprits for the catastrophe we are heading towards. Carolyn explained that the climate collapse will be a fact in 20 years if we do not change drastically. It becomes dramatically clear how important political decisions are in the curbing of consumption and waste.

There was also an incubation space that, unfortunately, was mainly used to prepare for the final stage show, which featured poets, musician and artists, and to forge



Chris Soal, *Untitled*, Mali 2018

collaboration among them. It would have been much more beneficial for all of us to rather talk further with the students, to develop ideas together and embark on an honest exchange. South African painter Jaco van Schalkwyk, for example, had such an exchange with Vincent Chandra, a recent arts graduate from Undiksha. This encounter has enabled a mentoring relationship and a residency for Vincent in Johannesburg in 2019. This will be the start of a long-term collaboration with South African and Balinese artists and writers. That is what incubation should enable.

After ten days of experimenting with arts and activism, the dusty field in front of the ocean becomes the stage for the final festival. No wake-up call yet, but a strong statement about the state of the interrelation of the arts and an activism that still needs to grow. But the promise it shows is out in this world at last and will be a good fundament for the next festivals.

One image will stay with me for a long time: South African artist Chris Soal's altarpiece with its halved plastic bottle that will never melt but will instead stay with us as a *memento mori* of human hubris and our disconnection with nature. **CF**



Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by **INDRA WUSSOW**, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.