

Being Present

Australia in Indonesia



Alison Carroll

Cemeti Art House,
Yogyakarta, 2003, a private
gallery with a wider role,
still influential in Indonesia.
Photo: A. Carroll

Opposite:
French Cultural Centre
(IFI), Yogyakarta, 2003
Photo: A. Carroll

When I first started to lobby for a physical, stand-alone Australian cultural presence in Indonesia in the early 2000s I said ‘everyone’ had such a thing—except Australia and the USA. By 2010 the USA had a US\$5 million cultural space in central Jakarta (with an annual running budget at US\$3m).¹ Australia remains even less ‘present’ today.²

This issue raised its head again at a Playking Foundation meeting in Melbourne in November 2022, to discuss Australia’s international cultural engagement among players with decades of expertise in the field. Indonesia specialist Tim Lindsey, quiet and effective as usual, stressed the importance of “being present”.³ You—we—have to be there.

If we are to achieve this physical presence to enhance bilateral engagements, a site in the smaller, more human-scaled, arts city of Yogyakarta rather than the expensive, government-focused megalopolis of Jakarta, suits the arts-focused nature of the proposal, then—and now.

Why do this? Let me take that question from the back. In 2003, ‘everyone’ supported a cultural physical presence—a building, staff and a budget for events—in Indonesia. As I wrote in two articles in *Art Monthly* in 2005 and 2006, ‘Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, India and Japan’ all ran cultural centres there.⁴ Twenty years later these countries continue to support active centres, and others like the Koreans are more visibly “present”. The difference is the Americans, and, looming in the background, the Chinese. The



Confucius Centres for language teaching have been separated from a more overt push by the Chinese for an official, concrete, cultural presence internationally. In 2015 the *China Daily* reported on Indonesia:

*Chinese vice Premier Liu Yandong and Indonesian Minister of Human Development and Culture Puan Maharani have witnessed the signing of a deal to establish cultural centres in each other’s country on May 27.... The Chinese Ministry of Culture has speeded up the establishment of cultural centres overseas. So far, there are 20 in the world with plans to build 50 more by 2020. The centres boost people’s understanding of China through events and activities including training programs, art performances, exhibitions, seminars and forums.*⁵

A map of centres in 2021, published by the China Cultural Centre in Sydney, is enlightening.⁶ A more general article on this issue of cultural exchange between Indonesia and China was published in 2019 in *The Diplomat*.⁷

Why would these countries create, and fund, such centres if they saw no need, purpose or advantage? What is Australia missing? Certainly, many of these centres have the dual focus on language teaching, which on the surface, is at least finance-neutral but that does not obviate their parallel work in “culture”. Even the pandemic does not seem to have affected the activities that now leap from their various websites.

My argument for a greater focus twenty years ago remains the same today: culture in Indonesia, our neighbour, is rich and we can only benefit from engagement with it. Other arguments for engagement, like political closeness, economic



French Cultural Centre (IFI) (top) and French Cultural Centre café/garden (bottom), Yogyakarta, 2019
Photos: A. Carroll

advantage or national security, are not what drives cultural engagement: they never were and never should be. The rest of the world has understood this, viz the German invitation for Indonesian curatorship for *Documenta*, so why don't we?

We no longer have a specific Cultural Counsellor in Jakarta at what is the biggest Australian Embassy in the world. Funding for arts activities from the Australia Council and the Australia Indonesia Institute is paltry. As I have written elsewhere, Indonesians frequently say to me "where have you all gone?"⁸

Many in the Australian art world could say, why spend money on infrastructure when it chips into funding for Australian artists? But the whole is a mix of both, and per-dollar 'value' for cultural investment in Yogyakarta can only enhance artists' opportunities in both countries.

Though the 2004 proposal was halted following the bombing targeting the abovementioned Australian Embassy in Jakarta, the practical details remain. The suggested funding mix was one third from the Australia Indonesia Institute (part of DFAT), one third Australia Council and one third 'other' – we initially approached the Myer Foundation. The budget then was A\$200,000 p.a., including rent, an Australian to manage it (at arms-length from the Embassy), local Indonesian staff and program costs. The purpose was open, but to provide a venue for events (exhibitions, performances, discussions) and to be an information hub for activities in both countries. Its remit would be based on fostering and furthering

relationships, not country propaganda nor a commercial imperative.

Costs would be greater in 2023, but would still be achievable. One model is the Institut Français, in an old house near the centre of Jakarta, with a café garden, which, when I have visited, always looks well attended – if the motorcycles parked outside are any guide.⁹ Another is the ACICIS Study Indonesia centre run by Australian universities, initially focused on language teaching, now with support for wider activities through the New Colombo Plan.¹⁰ These things can be worked through, based on local interests, current thinking, desired ends, and practicalities. Monash University's new campus in Jakarta will be an interesting site to watch too.

I had originally argued to name the cultural site the Emily Kngwarreye Centre, following the Germans and their respect for Goethe, the Spanish for Cervantes and the Dutch for Erasmus. It pays respect to an Aboriginal woman artist known for art made in her old age, and one whose first forays into transcultural art were in the traditional Indonesian technique of batik painting. Critics said the name is difficult to spell and pronounce, but 'Goethe' and 'Cervantes' are not obvious pronunciations either—for the non-German or non Spanish native.

Current European thinking in terms of cultural presence seems to be about flexible and local engagement. Many Government agencies have this embedded in their words. The Netherlands' DutchCulture, with support from their Culture and Foreign Ministries (plus others), has a role as *[a] network and knowledge*

*organisation for international cultural cooperation....We identify developments and investigate themes and domains that are relevant to successful collaboration. We share knowledge and insights with the cultural and creative sectors.*¹¹

The Goethe Institut is well funded by the German Federal Government, with a negotiated renewable five-year contract, but leaves much of its decision-making to each in-country director. Leonhard Emmerling, currently director of the GI in Chicago, writes this provides "context specific programs that make sense in the specific environments, and diversity".¹²

The 2022 Playking meeting had a bigger agenda than specific cultural centres: to discuss an International cultural policy for Australia. One practical option is a new Australian International Cultural Agency, perhaps another arm of the federal super-organisation Creative Australia launched in 2023. The idea is for a cultural agency, not a political nor economic one, though partnerships with others have positive flow on effects. It would have carriage of a centre in Yogya (and perhaps elsewhere). It could have a role fostering proactive regional cultural dialogue built through relationships on the ground.

It's worth us all reflecting on this 'lack' on our nation's footing. Is it a lack of respect for Indonesian culture, or lack of commercial advantage—for Australia—in Indonesia? Is it simply a lack of vision, interest or courage? Surely the cost of such

a centre in Indonesia—minimal in real terms—is only a red herring.

¹ Norimitsu Onishi, "U.S. Updates the Brand It Promotes in Indonesia," New York Times, 6 March 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/world/asia/06indonesia.html>; Accessed 21 January 2023__2 Revive, the Australian Government's new National Cultural Policy, announced 30 January 2023, mutedly acknowledges this, though without any proactive details. The policy booklet, notes, p. 93, that the government will 'Strengthen arts collaboration and exchange and cultural diplomacy by leveraging Australia's diplomatic network in key Australian overseas posts.' file:///C:/Users/aliso/Downloads/national-cultural-policy-27-january-2023.pdf; Accessed 30 January 2023__3 "Australia's International Arts Engagement" Playking Foundation, Melbourne, 3 November 2022__4 Alison Carroll, "Letter from Indonesia" Art Monthly 183 (September 2005): 3–5; Alison Carroll, "Wish you were here: Australian Government funding for our art overseas" Art Monthly 196 (December 2006): 46–49. The quote is from the 2006 article, page 47__5 "China and Indonesia set up mutual cultural centres," China Daily, 2 June 2015. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2015-06/02/content_20885388.htm#; Accessed 21 January 2023__6 "CCC In The World", China Cultural Centre in Sydney, <https://cccsydney.org/world-map/>; Accessed 23 January 2023__7 Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, "Chinese Culture Gradually Penetrates Indonesia," The Diplomat, 18 April 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/chinese-culture-gradually-penetrates-indonesia/>; Accessed 23 January 2023__8 Alison Carroll, "'Where have all you Australians gone?' Australian's shrinking role in cultural diplomacy," The Conversation, 11 May 2022. <https://theconversation.com/where-have-all-you-australians-gone-australians-shrinking-role-in-cultural-diplomacy-181485>; Accessed 23 January 2023__9 Institut Français Indonesia, <https://www.ifi-id.com/yogyakarta/>; Accessed 23 January 2023__10 Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesia Studies, <https://www.acicis.edu.au/>; Accessed 23 January 2023__11 "About DutchCulture", DutchCulture, <https://dutchculture.nl/en/profile/>; Accessed 22 January 2023__12 Leonhard Emmerling, Goethe Institute, Chicago; email to author 5 May 2022.

Alison Carroll backpacked through Java, Bali and Sulawesi in 1973. On an Australia Council curatorial travel grant, she visited again in 1988, asking 'what art did Indonesians want to see from Australia?'. The answer was unequivocal: art made now from elsewhere. Her first curatorial project there was Art from Australia; Eight Contemporary Views, shown at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1990. She was Founding Director of Asialink Arts from 1990–2010 and a member of the Australia Indonesia Institute Board at the time of the first proposal for a presence in Indonesia.