



Wok the Rock at the Biennale Jogja XIII (2015). Photo by Aki Onda.

Wok the Rock Interview by Aki Onda

Yes No Wave Music is an online record label founded by Woto Wibowo (a.k.a. Wok the Rock) in 2007. Based in the Javanese cultural hub of Yogyakarta, Yes No Wave Music is a grassroots platform that releases albums by Indonesian artists and promotes their activities internationally. Wok's appearance is that of a punk rocker, and so is his approach to life and business. The label is run with an anarchic DIY spirit, focused on building post-capitalist alternatives to music industry norms. All music on the label is free to download, distribute, and remix. This free-for-all approach exemplifies an Indonesian ethos of sharing resources and the necessity for artists to develop their work in the face of scarce government support and funding.

Wok also runs the monthly concert series Yes No Klub, co-founded with Timothy O'Donoghue in 2010, and he subsequently co-curated Nusasonic — a traveling project with two other Southeast Asian platforms WSK Festival and Playfreely/BlackKaji, and CTM Festival in Berlin. You may have heard Indonesian artists such as Senyawa, Gabber Modus

Operandi (GMO), and Raja Kirik, as they regularly tour globally and appear in music journals. Wok is the behind-the-scenes producer who helped their musical development and international success.

I first met Wok in 2015 at a party in a trendy hotel in Yogyakarta. It was the first night after my arrival to the city, which is also known as Jogja. I was a curator for TPAM (now YPAM – Yokohama Performing Arts Meeting) — a platform to present Asian artists to international art professionals. Everyone in the Jogja music scene who I wanted to meet was at the party, including Wok. He was in the midst of curating the Biennale Jogja XIII and told me to stop by the festival's main venue, the Jogja National Museum. The next morning, I took a taxi from my hotel but the driver had never heard of the museum. After multiple phone calls, he took me to a grungy ex-school building with a shabby improvised structure and a sign that read "National Museum." Wok welcomed me with grins: "It's a rented space, and just a joke that it's the National Museum." In Indonesia, I had heard that successful international events could be organized with a very small budget, and I was impressed that Wok had managed such a large program including dozens of installations and almost daily performances.

I also met vocalist Rully Shabara and multi-instrument player Wukir Suryadi of Senyawa as they presented a solo project of each in the biennale. In addition to Wok, Rully and Wukir have been the main protagonists supporting the local music community in Jogja. Even after tremendous international success, they still nurture new generations of artists.

Wok was a well-respected local organizer when I met him, but not many knew him outside his country. After eight years, he became a savvy world-class producer who works with both Southeast Asian and Western institutions. His Yes No Wave operation is bigger than ever. This tide is also backed by other

cultural shifts — the Indonesian art and music scenes have been receiving significant attention, culminating in the closely-watched documenta 15, curated by Jakarta-based art collective Ruangrupa in 2022. Yet, at the core of his heart, Wok maintains a humble DIY attitude. He runs his label in a small, cluttered office, designs the website himself, makes T-shirts, and sells merch at his music events, still making time to find new talent on a remote island and help to produce their work. Below is the transcript of my recent conversation with Wok. He traced the trajectory of his career, his bonds to the local, and how he navigated himself on the international scene.

Yogyakarta, (2015). Photo by Aki Onda.



How was the Jogja scene when you moved there from your hometown Madiun, also in Java, to study design at a university in 1994?

The economic and political situation in Indonesia was in complete chaos! The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 erupted, and Indonesia was the hardest hit. Suharto's authoritarian regime was bankrupt and had a huge debt to the World Bank. Suddenly, everything became super expensive due to inflation. Street protests were everywhere and the people wanted Suharto to step down, after his thirty-two-year military dictatorship.

In Indonesia at that time, underground music scenes such as punk, indie-rock, death metal, industrial music, hip hop, and electronic music were developing. We learned how to organize these subculture

movements with very minimal resources — how to produce albums and release them, organizing gigs, publishing zines, building and expanding networks et cetera. Some of our friends brought zines, books, bootleg tapes, and VHSes from abroad, and those were great inspiration.

Massive protests against Suharto in 1998 successfully ousted the president. This movement is known as the Reformasi (political reformation). After that, the society became more open and tolerant, and this helped to form and develop underground scenes.

How did you start your career after school? You were co-founder of Ruang MES 56, an alternative artist-run space for contemporary photography. What was your role?

Ruang MES 56, (2004). Photographer unknown.



Before joining Ruang MES 56, I was a member of punk collective Realino Bootbois, and also co-founder of the political artist collective Taring Padi back in 1999. In 2002, I joined Ruang MES 56 as graphic designer and introduced DIY methods to the organization — how to run a gallery and organize a program.

punk. Also, I learned about the Velvet Underground from the punk community, which led me to gain knowledge about experimental music and avant-garde art movements such as Fluxus.

Rully Shabara once told me that you helped to form Senyawa. How did it happen?

It seems that sort of collective engagement was a common method of working in Indonesia. Can you explain why and how it works?

Well, we learnt the terms “artist collective” and “artist-run space” from Europe. Ha-ha . . . But the concept and practice were similar to Indonesian society’s tradition, which were common prior to Suharto’s militaristic and capitalistic New Order starting from 1966. So, those ideas reminded us of what we used to be. We loved to be open to others and share what we have. And, because of the warm climate — sunshine all through the year — we always hang out outside with friends. That’s why the collective method was adopted easily and bloomed.

How was getting involved with the local music scene? What was happening there?

I have always been curious about new things since I was little. In high school, I was into death metal and grunge. Punk was new in Indonesia in the early to mid '90s, and still super underrepresented. I loved the rawness, simplicity, and emotional quality such as anger. The most important to me: I realized it could be a tool for a social movement, and that opened up my mind. I hung out more with friends who were into

I knew Rully because of his band ZOO, and I re-issued their first EP on Yes No Wave in 2007. From 2009 to 2010, he wanted to do a series of collaboration gigs with solo musicians. He was looking for someone with special knowledge and skills in traditional music who doesn’t fall into the category of stereotyped “world music” or pseudo-Eastern contemporary music. He wanted them to be more visceral and open to experimentation.

Then, I met Wukir Suryadi and he proposed his new collaborative album to be released on my label. I didn’t know him before. A friend who recorded his album told him to contact me. When he played the recording and demonstrated his handmade instrument, I immediately knew that he was the one Rully was looking for!

I introduced them to each other, and two weeks later, they came to me with the recording of their “jamming.” It was something that I had been looking for for so many years. It sounded completely new and fresh. A rock music with strong local tradition and spirit. It wasn’t just a mixture of west and east or new and old. I felt it is something like when musicians in the '50s invented Dangdut and Keroncong (both popular musical genres particularly to

Indonesian). For me, “experimental” is not only making something weird or odd, but a way of inventing something you have never heard before. I wanted to introduce Senyawa to everyone in the art and music scenes in Indonesia. Not just because of their music, but also their unique cultural significance. I didn’t think about promoting them internationally, as my network was limited in Indonesia back then.

Eventually, you started a monthly gig series called Yes No Klub. What was the goal of this platform?

Around 2000 to 2007, the experimental music scene in Jogja was booming. I was busy with Ruang MES 56 and pursuing my visual art practice. Then, my friend and Australian artist Timothy O’Donoghue, who was a member of the art collective Performance Klub, told me that he knew Australian experimental musicians willing to travel to Jogja and perform. We thought it would be a good idea to set up a monthly gig series and provide a platform where Jogja-based musicians can freely explore their musical practices alongside musicians from outside of Indonesia. The name Yes No Klub was a coined word combining Yes No Wave and Performance Klub. Another Indonesian-Australian artist and curator Kristi Monfries had just moved to Jogja and helped us a lot. She eventually became Senyawa’s manager and introduced them to the international audiences.

Then, Yes No Klub’s activities spread to other Indonesian cities and beyond to other Southeast Asian countries?

Well, most of our events have been held in Jogja until now. The only time we managed to organize events elsewhere was when we worked with other presenters such as Nusasonic and Pestapora festival in Jakarta.

How did you start working with Nusasonic?

It started when Goethe Institut Jakarta invited me to co-curate Nusasonic. First, they asked CTM Festival and a Berlin-based producer Rabin Beaini to curate the festival. But Rabin and Jan Rofhl of CTM suggested to them it would be better to bring Southeast Asian curators. So, Rabin (who produced Senyawa’s third album), Rully, and Wukir recommended me.

Nusasonic brought artists from Southeast Asia and from Europe. What did the curators want to do with this platform?

In the beginning, we wanted to connect artists within the regions, especially among the Southeast Asian countries. It’s interesting that there were artists in each country who worked a lot in Europe and Japan but didn’t have opportunities to work within the region. So, we wanted to solve this issue and organized discussion and performance events in Jogja, Singapore, Ho Chi Minh, and other cities. We also wanted to find a way to work together to avoid the dichotomy of “West” and “East,” which has always been an issue on both sides.

VICE Meets Senyawa (2019)

> [Link to YouTube](#)



Nusasonic (2018). Photo by Doni Maulistya.

It also opened up opportunities for other artists in Southeast Asia as Western curators realized that something was happening in that region. Before that, Senyawa was the only Indonesian band touring in the Western experimental music scene, and the other artists started following the same path. How do you feel Senyawa became so famous?

I'm so proud of their international success! It's just not about their recognitions. Their work challenges the dominant Western status quo and questions their norms.

That reminds me of Senyawa releasing their album *Alkisah* from forty-four different labels in 2021, which seems to be related to the sharing culture in Indonesia. It's always good to question the status quo and explore other possibilities . . .

Anyway, what do you think of Indonesian artists presented in the European context? What is different from presenting them at the local Yes No Klub gigs?

In Europe, they have the best venues, great sound systems, and well-managed production teams. It's a very different working environment for us in Indonesia. We also found out that many Europeans don't know the brutal history of Dutch colonization and slavery in Indonesia! We have a chance to learn more about each other. Presenting Indonesian artists abroad can be an act of decolonization!

Raja Kirik, "ACT II. Budhal Gumuruh" (2023)
> [Link to YouTube](#)

In Western art and music culture, it has become a trend to look at the Global South. However, many of these projects do not try to learn the local contexts these artists belong to, and their works are judged from Western perspectives. It's good to learn from each other, as you say. Also, "colonization" is a highly complex subject as it also brings syncretic values to pre-colonial life and culture. Senyawa, Gabber Modus Operandi (GMO), Raja Kirik ... those bands incorporate traditional musical elements then transform it to something contemporary. In Indonesia, what do listeners think of this?

They think their music is not cool! Ha-ha . . . Most Indonesians are post-colonial people who think the

Western culture is better than ours. Also, many traditional music fans consider bands like Senyawa, GMO, and Raja Kirik to be too weird, too dissonant, and Western-influenced. So, in Indonesia, experimental music artists are very niche. But it's interesting that after their international success, some indie bands started incorporating local traditional sounds.

Gabber Modus Operandi, "Dosa Besar" (2023)
> [Link to YouTube](#)

They also frequently quote Indonesian local rituals and cite those belief systems and symbols of the village life and culture. For instance, Senyawa often stated influence from the Javanese possession ritual Jathilan. Raja Kirik's new album is titled "The Phantasmagoria of Jathilan" and explores that tradition. GMO frequently adopts videos of shamanistic trance rituals and exorcism and combines them with their music. Why is it so important to embrace this sort of spiritual power for them?

First, I would say that these artists have heavy metal, punk, and hard rock backgrounds. If they would like to do something in the local context with the energy and spirit of their roots, Jathilan or similar traditional rituals come first! Second, since they are from the underground music scene, which is empathetic to proletarian or lower-class social values, rituals performed by villagers makes sense. The artists you mentioned came from low- to middle-class families. Although it may seem superstitious from the Western perspective, the ritual culture is strong in Indonesia. Even these days, they are widely practiced, especially in the countryside.

So these artists are looking into the local culture through their interest in Western underground culture?

No. These artists integrate cosmopolitan and local cultural elements into their works. Indonesia has such a rich and diverse music history, and these artists actually quote from many different types of traditions.

Asep Nayak, "Aster Wisisi Papua (Wamena)" (2022)
> [Link to YouTube](#)

Last year, one of my favorite albums was Asep Nayak's *Etai Wisisi Waga O Wamena*

Hanorasuok, which you produced. It's an electronic dance music inspired by traditional Wisisi — a ritualistic music and dance often performed at village ceremonies in the mountains of West Papua. It's something I never heard of before. So enjoyable and catchy, especially on YouTube videos. Watching the people dance makes you feel positive. How did you find him and how was the musical style invented?

Well, I didn't find it but Kasimyn of GMO did. He has such strong curiosity and had been researching local electronic music in Indonesia, especially the ones that adopt particular local styles. He happened to find Wisisi while he was looking into hip hop in Papua on YouTube. Then, he shared the videos with me and his bandmate Ican. We were blown away! So intense, fun, unique, and it presents their own culture so well. We never heard this kind of sound before as we live in Java and Bali. People in Java have no clue what's going on in other islands. Most Indonesian music festivals in Java only present artists from Jakarta and Bandung, unfortunately. Yes No Wave wants to change this!

After the pandemic, you started releasing albums of artists from other Southeast Asian countries such as Pisitakun from Thailand and Lynn Nandar Htoo from Vietnam. Is this expansion related to that?

I wanted to work with artists in neighboring countries. One of the reasons: we are separated by our colonial history with European countries. But our cultures have so many similarities.

Yes. Geographically, those thousands of islands were part of so-called Malay Archipelago, or East Indies, and there has been cultural and economic exchange all through history. But the political divide hinders that. Another question . . . you have also been active in the visual art scene in Indonesia, both as a curator and artist. What does being multidisciplinary mean for you?

I'm a creative person, and I love to sing, dance, draw, and write poems. In school I was skilled at drawing, so I went to the visual art department at university. Multidisciplinary art is a Western idea. Seniman (translated into English as "artist") in the ancient Southeast Asian archipelago worked on whatever mediums they could use to transform their ideas into artwork. It's a sort of local tradition. Ha-ha . . . Here's the true reason I love working with different types of artists: I use art as a tool for social practices.

What can you envision for the future of Yes No Wave?

I have no idea. Ha-ha . . . Whatever it is, the world is getting worse and tougher. So, we need to work together more. Learning different cultures and working with them more and more!

Pestapora 2023, Jakarta. Photographer unknown.

