# The Indonesian People Inspire Taring Padi to Create

## The Fourteenth Art Bulletin (April 2025)




Listen to Check Your People - Morgue Vanguard and Doyz

[Listen to '**Check Your People**' by Indonesian hip hop artists, Morgue Vanguard from Bandung and Doyz from Jakarta.]

Seventy years ago this month, the leaders of twenty-nine newly independent or soon-to-be independent African and Asian states came together in Bandung, Indonesia, representing half of the world's population. As the Third World Project was being born at the 1955 Asian-African Conference, so too was the spirit of an internationalist culture. Marking this historic moment was the first international group exhibition of Indonesian artists, including contemporary and traditional paintings. This diversity of styles marked the pluralism of non-alignment, with anti-imperialist culture as the common thread. In his opening speech at the conference, Indonesian president Sukarno spoke about the persistent 'life-line of imperialism', which forms the basis of Afro-Asian unity. 'No people can feel themselves free, so long as part of their motherland is unfree. Like peace, freedom is indivisible', Sukarno affirmed. 'There is no such thing as being half free, as there is no such thing as being half alive'. Our **dossier** this month, *The Bandung Spirit*, honours this history

while examining its relevance today.

For the Bandung anniversary, we spoke to the Indonesian art collective, Taring Padi meaning 'the fang of the rice plant', referring to the spiky grain that causes itchiness and discomfort. Alex Supartono, Setu Legi, Dodi Irwandi, Fitri DK, Bayu Widodo, Lidyja Trianadewi, S. Lilik, and M. Ucup joined us via Zoom from the kitchen of their collective space, where conversation, exchange, eating, and creation happens. Founded in Yogyakarta in 1998, Taring Padi was born from the embers of Suharto's New Order regime. The thirty-two year dictatorship followed the CIA-backed coup that deposed Sukarno in 1965, and over one million communists, including cultural workers, and their sympathisers were killed. Indonesian society is still marked by this open wound, which has moved many of the younger generations of artists and activists into political life, and the struggle to recover, remember, and learn from this brutal history that has since been violently erased.




Taring Padi's *Memedi Sawah/Scarecrow Installation* exhibited at the Busan Biennale, South Korea, 2024.

M. Ucup, one of Taring Padi's founders recalls, 'We learned about '65 from our parents, neighbours, and friends since it was the direct experience of every Indonesian. It's a constant topic that reappears in our work in one way or another'. As student activists, some of the founding members were also involved in the underground movement that eventually brought down Suharto. But their work was not finished. 'We understood that political art was still needed in our country,' said Ucup. 'The system still continued, so the political art needed to continue, and we declared the creation of Taring Padi'. For them, the fall of Suharto was not their ultimate objective. According to Alex Supartono, their priority was to 'actively promote and develop cultural practices that were truly oriented towards the people'. This commitment to people's culture – or *kebudayaan rakyat* – has a long history in the revolutionary cultural movements of the country.







Left: View of Taring Padi's *Podho podho* ('The same') (1999) at a protest in Indonesia calling for Suharto to answer for his crimes. Right: The back cover of the July 2002 issue of Taring Padi's *Terompet Rakyat* ('People's Trumpet') zine. It reads, 'Lawanlah / Anda seniman, pekerja seni, budayawan, penulis / yang mempunyai keinginan membantu rakyat / bergabunglah bersama kami!' ('Resist / You are an artist, art worker, cultural worker, writer / who has a desire to help the people / join us!').

Taring Padi's original name *Lembaga Budaya Kerakyatan Taring Padi* ('the Institute of People-Oriented Culture of Taring Padi') echoes the legacy of *Lekra* or *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* ('the Institute for People's Culture'), a cultural front closely linked to the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) that reached a membership of over 200,000 by the time of the 1965 genocide. Born together with the country's independence in the August 1945 Revolution, Lekra was founded because of the essential 'connection between the revolution and culture, an awareness that the revolution has great significance for culture, and, at the same time, culture has great significance for the August Revolution.' This is how Secretary-General Joebaar Ajoeb described it at Lekra's national congress in 1959.

Throughout its fifteen-year existence, Lekra not only mobilised millions, but developed cultural practices rooted in the people's concrete and material conditions. From their organising, new expressive forms and artistic theories emerged – they were, in essence, writing art history in the Marxist tradition. One of their principles to guide artist-militants' work was *Turun ke bawah* or *turba* ('descend from above' or 'going down to the masses'), which meant working, eating, and sleeping alongside the people. Lekra poet Martin Aleida shared with me how this principle allowed you to 'intensify your imagination and inspiration, to sharpen your feelings about how hard the lives of the people are'. The full conversation and the history of Lekra can be found in our 2020 **dossier**, *The Legacy of Lekra: Organising Revolutionary Culture in Indonesia*.




A carnival with banners by Taring Padi remembering four years of the Lapindo Mud Tragedy in Siring Barat, Porong, Sidoarjo, East Java (2010).

On the thread that connects Lekra to Taring Padi, Aleida **wrote**,

> History repeats itself, and the power to shape this repetition now lies in the hands of Taring Padi. From the lines they carve, it becomes clear that visual art is not an intoxicating arena of aesthetic acrobatics, nor merely a resting place in the pursuit of individual satisfaction… Lines – and colours as well – must unequivocally indicate a clear direction, siding with victims, in times of peace or conflict alike, notably peasants and workers, the two crucial forces driving civilisation forward. This was a conviction once proudly upheld by Lekra.

Similar to Lekra, the content and form of Taring Padi's work is deeply rooted in Indonesian folk and socialist realist traditions. The logo of the collective itself is a symbol of this synthesis. The red star, a sprig of rice, a cogwheel, and a metal chain are a combination of local agrarian and classic socialist symbols. Just as their cardboard puppets (*wayang kardus*) that they make for mobilisations draw from Indonesia's shadow puppetry tradition, their woodcut printmaking (*cukil kayu*) and open-air mural painting are inspired by the long history of Javanese popular forms of communication. Across their diverse artistic media, corrupt officials, greedy capitalists, and violent generals are depicted using satirical folk idioms. Using visual language familiar to ordinary Indonesians, what Mao Zedong would have **called** 'the lively language of the people', Taring Padi tells the story of people's resistance in its own localised socialist realism. Expanded from the Soviet aesthetic principle, Lekra's Secretary-General Joebaar Ajoeb defined socialist realism as not being 'simply realistic', but

that which 'gives hope and direction'.






Left: Taring Padi's *Rakyat Demokratik* ('People's Democracy') was made in 1998 after the fall of Suharto. It was burnt down in 1999 by a group of Islamic fundamentalists. A replica was produced in 2021 and exhibited at Documenta fifteen. Right: Documenta fifteen Exhibition. Farewell lunch at Gudkitchen, where we cooked Indonesian food.

In the 'Five Evils of Culture' formulated in Taring Padi's **manifesto**, the collective condemns 'art for art's sake', that which estranges the people from the development of art, and artists who exploit people's struggles for personal gain. Instead, their practice insists on creating art *with* and *for* oppressed communities to resist social and political ills such as corruption and military violence, while fighting for a future through struggles for land reform and gender equality. Taring Padi's collective artistry of over twenty-seven years has brought them into the international limelight, exemplified by their participation in Documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany. However, this attention brings its own contradictions. 'The art world can be so seducing, but we try to stay rooted', Alex added. 'We set a few rules, for example, we don't do exhibitions at commercial galleries. We only sell our non-reproducible work to publicly-funded institutions'.

To navigate these worlds, Alex said, 'The answer is just keep working with the collective, with the people, with our comrades'. They prioritise their work with local movements and communities, notably Brazil's **Landless Rural Workers' Movement** (MST) in 2023 and the Aboriginal Australian collective **proppaNow** in 2024, and maintaining their close-knit intergenerational *kampung* ('community') in Yogyakarta. Working collectively and always signing their works collectively is a core praxis of Taring Padi. 'Working collectively is important because we can't resolve problems by ourselves', Setu Legi reflects. 'It is not just a problem for us in Indonesia. We as artists can't do this by ourselves, we need to be together to become strong'. It is through collaboration that Taring Padi learns and cultivates their own spirit of internationalism.







Collaboration between Taring Padi and MST militants on the production of the banner *Retomar Nossa Terra / Rebut Tanah Kita* (2023) in Brazil.

The Bandung Spirit of seven decades ago was rooted in internationalism, which President Sukarno understood was at the centre of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance. In 1959, he called upon artists to stand in the ranks of these struggles. 'We must be more vigilant, more tenacious, and more persevering in opposing imperialist culture, especially US imperialist culture, which in reality continues to threaten us in every shape and way'. This was also the year of the Cuban Revolution. Both Indonesia and Cuba were united against imperialism and jointly organising the 1966 Tricontinental Conference that would take place in Havana – the very conference that we pay homage to in our own name at **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**. Neither the Indonesian communists, Lekra, nor Sukarno's presidency would live to see that conference. For Taring Padi, political art is necessary because this struggle born seven decades ago remains unfinished.




Installation of the banner *People's Justice: Palestine* at the Nandur Srawung Exhibition, Yogyakarta, 2024.

'We are still fighting for humanity, for democracy, for the environment', Setu Legi affirms. 'In Indonesia now there are different dimensions of fascism and militarism; it looks like the struggles we had in 1998. The extreme right is everywhere in the world. This is an important time. But what are we doing about it? This is a question we have in Taring Padi. We need to struggle together. We need to fight together.'

To close this bulletin in this spirit of unity, here's an unattributed *pantun*, a popular form of oral poetry that was documented in the pages of the PKI's *Harian Rakyat* newspaper.

> The little boat sails there and back
> And reaches Surabaya
> In Cuba they repelled the attack
> Latin America being united with Afro-Asia.

Warmly,

Tings Chak
Art Director of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

P.S. Please check out our April portraits paying homage to revolutionaries and cultural workers from around the world **here**.