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Behind 'Through the Kebaya'

Victoria Cattoni

Approaching contemporary art practice within places/cultures not 'our own' can be overwhelming, particularly when the 'new' culture is one whose material culture is considerably more dynamic and richer than our own. Speaking from my own experience, and also from observing the responses of other artists whose practice, like my own, is installation or object based, the first point of contact in the new and foreign (often 'exotic') place can tend towards producing work that re-fashions, re-contextualises, re-constructs the visible 'everyday' – objects and materials from the new environment – into 'new' art forms. Very few artists are able to quickly transcend this tendency to work with and from the top veneer, since a more sophisticated approach requires time and knowledge, which cannot be easily garnered within short time frames.

This is not to devalue the experience of visiting and producing situational art in other cultures. Rather it is to acknowledge the nature and parameters of first contact. It was local materials including petals and rice (used in offerings in Bali), sand and lace brocade (used for the 'kebaya'¹, a traditional blouse from Indonesia) that formed the fabric of the first installations I produced in Indonesia, specifically in Bali, during the first two years of residing there. This was my first and superficial response, and a tangible way to make sense of, to locate myself within the 'strange', 'new' and aesthetically mind-blowing environment.

Re-locating oneself can also be an opportunity to re-invent oneself, whether intentionally or incidentally, and can result in tangential developments of one's work. I was based in Indonesia for six years (1998-2004) and by the third year there my practice expanded to include performance and video. Perhaps these developments would have occurred anyway, had I remained in Melbourne, where I had been based for the previous ten years. However, I believe that the new developments in my practice were directly related to my new local environment. This was the second impact, in which the local began affecting me.

'Kebaya'² (Lithuania 2000) and 'Kebaya South, South-east'³ (Finland 2001) were both video installation performance works and further developments of an earlier installation presented in Bali in 2000 - 'Kebaya Back Ground'. All of these works had involved myself as the performer and were the first works to directly incorporate the *kebaya* into them. In Lithuania, unbeknown to me, I had been billed in the promotional material for the event as being "from Bali". While I understood that this was a deliberate strategy by the organiser to attract audiences, it confronted me with a new set of complications, not the least, the tag of 'exoticism' in which I found myself potentially complicit.

In Indonesia, the work incorporating the *kebaya* - 'Kebaya Back Ground' - drew strong sentiment and opinion from local audiences for very different reasons. After all, the *kebaya* is considered the penultimate 'feminine' garment in many regions of Indonesia today. I realized from these responses that the *kebaya* could act as a doorway for an increased comprehension of the changing roles and status of women, and of how women see themselves today in certain parts of Indonesia, specifically Java and Bali. This was the beginning of a two and a half year research project, my Master of Visual Arts, 'Through the Kebaya'⁴. In its inception and

construction, the project was a considered attempt to avoid or minimise further aestheticising (and exoticising) of the *kebaya*, which is already a very beautiful material object.

Examining the *kebaya* in its multiple forms, functions and meanings was an effective way to explore cultural constructions of identity in particular in relation to aspects of the 'feminine'. I developed a methodology that was constructed around a series of interactive workshops⁵ in which individuals, mostly women⁶, were videoed trying on *kebaya*s of their choice and discussing their personal perceptions and reasons for wearing/not wearing it. This included both personal narrative and social commentary resulting in a performative journey that was simultaneously playful and investigative. When the resulting videos were presented publicly, as video performance installations, a cross-cultural dialogue began to emerge, revealing how 'femininity' sits in relation to cultural, personal and collective identity.

Kebaya... when a woman wears it, she looks alluring...

A person wearing the kebaya is setting an example of refinement which ought to be followed...

*I like wearing this kebaya because... in my opinion it makes us look more feminine and elegant...*⁷

Victoria Cattoni is a video/installation artist who has recently completed her MVA at Charles Darwin University where she also lectured. Later this year she will take up an Asialink Residency in Kuala Lumpur.

¹ For a more detailed description of the 'kebaya' see Cattoni, V 2004, 'Through the Kebaya', *Update*, Regional Galleries Association of Queensland, p. 5 or 'Reading the Kebaya', Cribb, Robert (ed.), 2004, *Asia Examined: Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the ASAA, 2004, Canberra, Australia*. Canberra: Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) & Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), The Australian National University

² *Laboratorija* International Performance Festival, National Drama Theatre, Vilnius, Lithuania 2000

³ *Tampere 48th Floral Festival*, Tampere, Finland 2001

⁴ Charles Darwin University, 2002-2004

⁵ The workshops were held in a number of locations in Indonesia, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Semarang and Bali, and in Australia, in Darwin.

⁶ There were a number of occasions in which men wished to participate in the workshops.

⁷ Excerpts of spoken texts from the interactive workshops conducted in Indonesia during 2003-2004