

## OLD CONCRETE FRIENDS

By Johnny Herbert

To accompany the exhibition text about Sebastián Díaz Morales's *Smashing Monuments*, Kunsthall 3,14's text contributor, Johnny Herbert, asked a few questions to the artist about the process of making the film and his collaboration with Indonesian art collective ruangrupa.

*JH: How did you initially meet ruangrupa and how did you start to work together/in parallel? Can you say something about how you feel their practice has affected your work?*

SDM: I met Ade Darmawan and Hafiz Rancajale, members by then of an early ruangrupa, in 2001. We met during a meet-up realised by the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and the group subsequently invited me to a workshop in Jakarta that same year. I spent practically a month in Indonesia. During this time, I discovered a method of working which I had missed since starting filmmaking in 1998. ruangrupa collaborated with each other under the bases of trust, friendship, and generosity towards the other. Things were messy, crowded, and busy all the time. Meetings were held everywhere and at any given moment day or night, but over and beyond meetings, you found people hanging out for hours on end. The next day you would wake up to meet twenty different people than the day before. The general mood was that any unrealistic project was possible to realise. Then we did a film, *15000000 Parachutes* (2001).

I'd often come back from trips to Indonesia with a premise for the making of a film. However, my last trips and *Smashing Monuments* was more complicated. I was traveling during Covid restrictions, borders were virtually closed to foreigners, beginning to open only when I arrived. There wasn't a clear budget at that point, I had only a week to shoot before all members of the artistic team for fifteenth edition of documenta [the enormous art exhibition held in Kassel, Germany every five years] were to fly back to Kassel, and it was just three and a half months before the exhibition opening date. Either something good came out of that trip or I had to come up with a plan B for documenta.

*Smashing Monuments* was only possible to realise because we knew each other and we knew our way of working. We were basically laughing about the situation we were in, and at the same time totally serious about the plan of making something significant. In this collaborative situation nothing is asked for in return and we exchange knowledge, time, and resources. It sounds idealistic and while sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, or, at least, it doesn't come as

expected. However, in the mood of doing it, the project is always an experience in which there is an anecdote to learn from.

*Your earlier Pasasje series of films have elements that Smashing Monuments continues with. The first couple of films from that series have a sense of film noir; a single person walks between contrasting spaces via doors, the editing making it seem like such spaces are adjoining and the contrasting sounds of each quiet acoustic space punctuated by the semi-purposeful (overdubbed) footsteps. After Pasasje III (2013)—made in collaboration with ruangrupa—it's as if the specific architectural and sonic focuses foregrounding mood (hence, the film noir reference) dissipated into something more to do with the semiotics of the spaces or sites chosen—purposeful, dramatic, anonymous formalism morphed into something like a wandering situational perusal (something Smashing Monuments takes even further). Would you agree?*

The series *Pasajes* intends to bring to the surface a map of a city or territory which has been neglected or displaced from a certain imaginary of the people that inhabit it. The films, made through their wanderers, are some sort of unusual portrait of a place. They are always a map but never the given accepted map of that place, which renders it some sort of hidden map of a place. The character wandering through these sites becomes only a guide and the reason and excuse to show us the place which in turn becomes the main character of the films.

In *Pasajes III* the objective was to portray Jakarta by way of its horrific traffic. It was a characterisation of the city during that moment in time. The city was the traffic and could be summed up or expressed by the number of vehicles in it and the impossibility of reaching different points of its map in a realistic period of time. It was said by then that the average Jakartan spent 10 years of their life in traffic.

In *Smashing Monuments*, the idea was to generate a discussion over the history of the city, the republic and the people that inhabit it as well as bringing forward the members of ruangrupa as a collective growing up in the young republic.

In both *Smashing Monuments* and *Pasajes III*, I believe the attitude towards the city has the same base concept. It utilised the city, the traffic, and the monuments as characters which are portrayed and questioned. Both films use a certain inertia to create a fiction.

*With the addition of the footsteps in Pasajes films, Smashing Monuments features striking music by Dick Verdult. Can you talk about your approach(es) to sound, and your decision to invite him and about the conversations you had about the music? There's often a sense of two or more musics running at the same time, as if we've tuned into two radio stations simultaneously.*

I've known Dick Verdult, aka Dick el Demasiado, a long time and always wanted to have some of his music in one of my films. Here, it was a perfect fit. The work needed a sort of music that at the same time resonated with the urbananity, the traffic, and the caricaturesque style of the monuments. On the other hand, it also needed to have a catchy rhythm. It had to be one with the sequence introduction of the character feet before reaching the monuments. Those shots are sequence shots, no cuts and they were meant to show the immediate surroundings of the monuments. They show the city without showing it since we see only from the level of the asphalt. To a certain extent, the sequences needed also to be a kind of a video clip. Dick played with a song introduced by one of the characters in the movie. Indra Ameng offers a song to the Pancoran Monument that cannot see him, since it ended up entangled by highways, but perhaps the monument can hear the music he plays for him. Dick resampled this first song played by White Shoes & the Couples Company (a pop band very close to ruangrupa) and made different variations for each of the episodes. The music in turn gives the soul to the city, the walking of the characters is almost like a dance between the traffic.

*What are your thoughts about the facial expressions of the sculptures in Smashing Monuments? We see them close-up in the film—something not physically possible given their elevation—and they seem to have a mixture of terrified (maybe even terrorised), frenzied, but also enraptured, euphoric, and exalted expressions.*

The monuments are mainly following a social realism style. They are on high pedestals and, until recently, their facial expressions were out of sight of people on the ground. I wanted to somehow bring them down to earth, have them face to face in these conversations. The idea sounded complicated since you can't fly drones in these areas, but with the team we obtained the necessary permissions to do so and got the close-up face shots we needed. We finally managed to see the details of the gestures of these old concrete friends. They may seem terrified as you say, but they are also friendly, so much that people have nicknames for them and joke about them as you would joke with a friend you respect and admire.

*I would very much like to see close-ups of more public sculptures/monuments! It strangely 'humanises' them—something the film in general attempts—but here it's more in a sense of uncovering the artifice; the close-ups produce an awareness of someone's (the sculptor's) desire to produce an effect from much further away than we see them in your film, thus the monuments are suddenly slightly exposed. Do you know anything about the artists, technicians, or commissioning process of any of the monuments?*

The first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, was inspired by his travels around the world, where he saw nationalistic architecture throughout China, Eastern and Western Europe, India, and the United States. The sculptor that made most of the monuments we see in the film was Edhi Sunarso; however, the concepts from these sculptures were undoubtedly influenced by Sukarno who saw them to be carriers of an ideology, history, and values strengthening a collective identity. This was something that the new republic urgently needed after 350 years of occupation.

*In the film, the ruangrupa members talk to the monuments. How did you come to the decision to speak to them? I'm particularly interested in how vision is attributed to them, e.g. what they can see and have seen...etc.*

I was interested in what these monuments, which were conceived to embody the values and ideals of the new republic of Indonesia, had to say about the present and their views of the future. They had been placed in their sites for a purpose during the construction of the new republic of Indonesia in the '60s. Through a conversation with some members of ruangrupa—who are first- and second-generation citizens of the free Indonesia after 350 years of Dutch colonial rule—historical and personal stories, and therefore the collective itself, could emerge.

I was invited to make a film, commissioned as an act of “harvesting” by ruangrupa. For ruangrupa, to “harvest” refers to artistic recordings of discussions and meetings. Harvesters listen, reflect, and depict this process from their own forms and artistic processes. I thought that the best portrait of a process I could make would be a sort of satirical portrait of them and their history, in a funny but also serious way. The film needed to show ruangrupa as they are and in return it should also show some of the values they worked out from for documenta fifteen: humour, independence, generosity, transparency, sufficiency, and regeneration. Having the members talk to the camera would have worked for the context and framework of documenta, but showing a conversation with these monuments in their own context transformed the idea of the “harvest” from a documentary into a fiction, in doing so exceeding the frame of documenta and reaching other places, such as Kunsthall 3,14.