

Three Parts of the Itinerant Photographer Project

There is a link that connects Dito Yuwono's work now and then: he collects memory. Some of these memories belong to himself while the rest belong to other people. He often starts small and takes a personal approach along the way. To him, memories are gateways to enter a past he yet to understand. When collected; these collective memories might form a bigger picture, story, and eventually find its way to history.

/Pt.1./

Dito first started the project due to his curiosity when he meets the man who was seemed to be the last itinerant photographer standing in Kaliurang: Mr.Dasri. Mr.Dasri started to work as an itinerant photographer in the 80s during the heyday of Kaliurang as a well known resort area at the slope of Mount Merapi, 25 KM away from the center of Yogyakarta. Located 900m above the sea level, Kaliurang is famous with its cool mountains air and beautiful scenery. This area was first recognized in the early 19th century when the Dutch built several villas for their geologists' family retreat. After independence, the ownership of these villas fell into the hand of the natives. Since that time; the royal family, companies, and individuals begin to build their vacation home at the area.

I have been following Dito Yuwono for more than a year while he was doing his project, "Recollecting Memories of *Tukang Foto Keliling (Itinerant Photographer)*". I was tailing him while he was playing detective for some reasons. First, I enjoy a good story and I saw him working on one at that time. Second, I can not resist a walking tour up and down the hill with fresh mountain air to have a long conversation with old men with genuine passion of what seem to be a raw approach to photography. Third, Kaliurang was also the place where I grew up. I was there when the tourist industry blossomed and later experience a free fall every four to six years when the volcano erupted. The industry has fallen and get back up again along with the cycle of Mt.Merapi, one of the most active volcanos in the world.. Changes were inevitable. I remember whenever we went for a picnic in the park, there were several itinerant photographers wearing blue Polaroid shirt offering to get our photo taken. Circa 2001, the number decreased significantly. When the Polaroid instant photo was still popularly used in the tourist area, there were approximately 13 photographers who were actively working in the whole recreational area. At the present time, there are only two people left. One of them is working in the Tlogo Nirmolo (the Japanese Cave), and the other is working in the area of Kali Adem (the eastern slope of Mount Merapi). Even though both of them are now using digital camera and portable photo printers that allows them to print the photo directly on the spot, one of them still wears the blue Polaroid shirt with pride.

When Dito moved to Kaliurang, it was like taking an artist around at the beginning of his residency. He starts paying attentions to things I, as a local, easily overlook. That was when he saw this guy wearing a blue Polaroid shirt with a big backpack to carry his photography tools. Even with all the changes that happens in Kaliurang tourist industry, Mr.Dasri was still devotedly get up in the morning, climb the hill, wait in front of one of the cave that was built by the Japanese in the 40s, and wish for a tourist to come

and get their picture taken. What was started out as a business later becomes his passion. The brief solitary walk in the hope of making one or two photographs a day has become more of a ritual. Dito then started to follow him around, digging into his old achievements, and recollect the shattered memories. They soon become friends and carefully weave these threads of memories into a big story for one year.

In the process, he came across another photographer who is still actively working and successfully made a humble management system for his business; those who ditched photography once the business was dropped; and several others who do not stay in the job but still keeping the achievements as memorabilia of the good old days. Dito starts to see each of their personal work and find personal aspects of this project. On the other side, there are bigger pictures to see. He started to see the connection between memory, citizen, history; and how collective memory of these citizens can be in line with bigger things that were happening at that era. First, the New Order's tourism campaign; second, the Polaroid industry; and third, the rise of digital technology. During the New Order era, tourist photography is nurtured and presented as Indonesian government increasingly devoted its economic strategy to develop tourism industry. A national campaign of "Tourism Awareness" (Kampanye Sadar Wisata) was brought to promote appropriate attitudes to facilitate tourism and general public awareness of the value of tourism. Photography was supported by the state, particularly to help promoting tourism.

The rise of itinerant photographers in Kaliurang was first started in 1981 with the presence of official Polaroid's distributor. A local citizen was designated as an official representative of the distributor and create a system that allow these itinerant photographers to formally station in every tourist destination in the area. Post-eruption of Mount Merapi in 1994, the amount of tourist visits to Kaliurang started to drop; followed by the declining consumption of tourist portraits. A strategic marketing turn has to be made and they start selling various photographs of Mount Merapi eruption as a tourist souvenir. In the beginning of 2000, the Polaroid instant camera products' sales began to decline. It led to the change of distribution pattern for instant film photography groups in Indonesia tourism area. By 2005, the official representative of Polaroid distributor in Kaliurang was laid off and in 2008; Polaroid announced to public that their instant film production is ended. At that time, the number of these itinerant photographers dropped dramatically, leaving only two of thirteen men in the business. Other than that, the technological shift from analog to digital allows everyone to bring their own camera. Photography that was always meant to be an open field for everyone is proven to be less and less exclusive by the development of technology. Suddenly, everyone can play a role as photographer themselves. Respectively, the presence of itinerant photographers is no longer considered relevant and slowly started to erode.

His first attempt to seek for a narrative of these itinerant photographers was done by creating an exhibition for them. In search of physical artifacts and relics on the Kaliurang Photography Group's heyday, Dito found a grey area that is somehow similar to their memories: a bit faded and mixed. Photo materials are brittle, the humidity caused loss or damaged photographs, there was no catalogue system, and there was no awareness to properly store the photo to ensure its durability. At the end of the year, Dito got the whole story about the informal group of itinerant photographers in Kaliurang. He uses the term "Kaliurang Photography Group" to refer to those who became itinerant photographers in the Kaliurang between 1981-2005. Their engagement in this 'group' is limited to the form of the

distribution pattern of Polaroid products with no attachment. The connection that unites them was unofficial, voluntary, and organic.

At that time, instead of taking position as an artist; Dito decided to curate and put up a group show of these photographers' achieve collections and personal photographic work. He then exhibits it in what seem to be a familiar and non-exclusive environment for them: a hotel room. The exhibition was like a reunion and a tribute to these photographers; a wrap up to the year-long journey that put the pieces of the puzzle together.

/Pt.2. /

Few months after the group exhibition of what Dito refers as "Kelompok Fotografi Kaliurang" (Kaliurang Photography Group); he continued the project focusing on the present day aspect of tourist photography. What was once a dream to see the world through other people's eyes has come true. The mundane things other people experience during their travelling time are now just one fingertip away. When he was working on the first part of the project, Dito starts to question the essence of tourist photograph taken by the itinerant photographers. Those Polaroid photos are taken home as a keepsake of the memory, a souvenir for the beloved one, or to be displayed on the living room. These days, the function of a photograph as a keepsake of the memory remains. The necessity to keep it as a souvenir from the merrier day has shifted from prints to digital form. Those photographs people used to display in the privacy of their living room, is now shared for the whole wide world to see. Dito later chooses instagram as the focus field for his observation for its quality of instant sharing, accessibility, and its ability to answer the need as a digital souvenir of the memory that can be shared to every audience.

Based on his observation, the practice of tourism photography almost always involves three elements all at once; the tourist, the photographer, and the landscape. All of which can now merged into one. The practice of *selfie* as a tourist portrait has changed the position and the presence of a photographer; replacing them by a tripod, monopod, or even the tourist's own hand. While the landscape photographs are continuously reproduced in similar visual aesthetic, it needs to be differentiated using the '*hashtag*'. Hashtag was first popularized in the 2007 via Twitter. Hashtag then functioned as folder separator to facilitate engine search, and affect the appearance of a trending topics (*hot topics that are widely discussed in Twitter*). This approach is later used and developed to categorize various other social medias including Instagram. Aside from that, the way people use hashtag underwent a shift in where people start using more than one hashtag in a single upload. It contrasting to the early days of its development when hashtag generally only written three times in a single upload. The function in most Instagram hash tags nowadays is still surrounded by the conversation of categorization efforts; but its use tends to be descriptive and not only explain what is in the photo, but also includes things that are not visible in the photograph.

For Dito, the use of a very descriptive *hashtag* is not only serves as additional information but also serve as photography itself (*unphotographed photography*). Each *hashtag* summon the memory of experiences to suit every word that appears as a keyword. The perspective provoked by the photo

displayed can be influenced by the hashtag; especially for *selfies* in which people's face might be covering a significant part of the frame. Hashtag evolves from a foldering tool into a descriptive illustration of the things that do not appear in the photo. The public are encouraged to imagine these things that is directly tied to memory and personal experience just by using several keywords. This second part of the project was briefly presented at Lir Space – Yogyakarta while the 'exhibition' are put up online in the instagram account @wisataselfie (<http://instagr.am/wisataselfie>) and @wisatatagar (<http://instagr.am/wisatatagar>).

/Pt.3./

By the time Dito met two itinerant photographers who are still actively working on the slope of Mt.Merapi, he starts to wonder if there are still any other itinerant photographers working at other tourism site in Indonesia. This time, he went to the National Monument (*abbreviated Monas*) that was build during Soekarno era as a symbol of pride and struggle for independence. As a national landmark that is located in the capital city, Monas still attract many visitors. Taking photograph at Monas was once upon a time a national symbol of self-representation and belonging to the nation. Yet, instead of looking back to the nostalgic aspect of the itinerant photographers, Dito chooses to see the present and the future.

Unlike what happened to its industry in Kaliurang, the itinerant photography business is still very much present at Monas. A number of itinerant photographers are still working around the park and despite the political turn and new management issue that might cost them their field; the group of itinerant photographer are currently fighting for their welfare. For his project, Dito is creating an imaginary cooperation in the gallery of Ruang Rupa to see how the practice of tourism itinerant photography is sustained through its socio-economic aspect. This project can be considered as a rebranding attempt for itinerant photographer in the hype of the analog in the digital age using visual language that is easily understood. At the same time, he also create a study of pose as a trademark. No matter how strange it might sound— pose can be some kind of business intellectual property for few minutes before people will start to adapt and copy it. After all, in a place like Monas, there can not be many original ideas left while avoiding the tourist cliché. The third part of Recollecting Memories of Tukang Foto Keliling might not be the last of the series. The artist will still be following the path of the itinerant photographer, putting the puzzle pieces together; trying to see the big picture while adding up personal details in it.

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