

## **KEG DE SOUZA: THE ART IS IN NEGOTIATION**

On the banks of the Kali Code River, that traces a smooth line through the centre of the Indonesian city Yogyakarta, lie numerous kampungs (as they are called in the local dialect Javanese and which roughly translates to community in English) that patchwork together the rich inhabited life of the city. Two of these neighbourhoods are Ratmakan and Jagalan. Established in the 1970s as informal squatting settlements, and built on land previously used for a Javanese and a Chinese graveyard, Ratmakan and Jagalan are cartographically unmapped densities of modest dwellings, provisionally built out of makeshift materials and other odds and ends. Some of these dwellings even feature tombstones seamlessly integrated into the walls, creating material reminders of the past's persistence in the present, and the shared stake hold that both tenses have in the area's unfolding future.

In the video component of artist Keg de Souza's multi-part work, *If There's Something Strange In Your Neighbourhood...* (2014), she approaches mapping Ratmakan and Jagalan in a way that accounts for the physical and social dimensions that delimit space, to exemplify the need to equally consider both in planning any prospective developments. To do this her camera lingers over architectural details, capturing small moments of community life, and documenting portraits of residents who, seen reflected in decoratively framed mirrors, narrate stories of Ratmakan and Jagalan's abundant paranormal activity. Through visceral descriptions the residents give shape to the ghosts they co-exist with. We meet the supernatural *Gendernu* (a hairy shape shifter) and *Weve Gombel* (who is fond of kidnapping children), as well as those more specific to the local community (including a neighbour, Pak Seto, who passed away a few days before he was seen again sitting on his stoop). Meanwhile, the spectral images of the residents' reflections in mirrors seem to foreshadow their own mortal time on Earth.

These ghost stories also provide greater insight into the lives and operations of the community, including that of one neighbour Pak Kuncung, whom de Souza has often compared to the much-loved cinematic heroes, the Ghostbusters. In the video Kuncung's role as a manager of paranormal activity in Ratmakan and Jagalan is recounted through tales of him being called upon to move along ghosts who have started to cause trouble, or to exorcise them from residents who have become possessed. But as Kuncung explains, removing the ghosts is not something that can be forced; it is something that must be achieved through careful negotiation. These negotiations involve the ghosts being made an offering, provided with a compensation package in exchange for them leaving, or carried by Kuncung to a new location of their choosing. As Kuncung is clear to articulate, such peaceful negotiation and resolution is important, as the ghosts have lived there the longest and have to want to leave.

Through these stories of paranormal negotiation and removal, questions of generational change and ownership are also purposefully foregrounded by de Souza due to the resonance they share, and the potential models they offer to the residents' own threat of eviction by Yogyakarta's local government. In 2013 the local mayor announced plans for major urban redevelopment of areas within a four-kilometre radius of the city's centre. Falling within this zone, Ratmakan already has the construction of a hotel underway and both kampungs are proposed as sites for more hotels, a potential overpass, shopping mall, hospital, or social housing units, that while yet to be decided, are all needed to satisfy

the demands of a growing tourism industry and Yogyakarta's resulting gentrification. For the residents of Ratmakan and Jagalan this is a particularly significant issue. As a predominantly squatted community their official relationship to the land is tenuous. Some of the residents technically own their homes but not the land that they are built on, and at present it remains unclear what their rights, if any, to government compensation will be, or if the redevelopment will provide accommodation for them there or elsewhere. What is clear is that the residents do not want to leave, and that they want to be included in any decision-making around their future.

As an artist, de Souza's relationship to inner city gentrification is also pertinent. The history of artists moving into socially and economically marginalised communities to capitalise on the affordable real estate, only for it to result in the existing communities being squeezed out first, then the artists second, by rents that increase alongside an area's cultural cachet, is an often told one. De Souza's practice however, seems to actively push against creating such conditions by asking: how might an artist and a community work alongside each other for mutual and collective gain? And how can art be used as a way of negotiating a shared and inclusive future for people within a city? With a background as an architect, and a history of practicing the spatial politics of squatting in inner city Sydney, de Souza brings these various influences to bear in the pursuit of an artistic practice that encourages and allows for multiple voices to co-exist.

Having developed a relationship with the people of Ratmakan and Jagalan on extended visits to Yogyakarta, in *If There's Something Strange In Your Neighbourhood...*, these communities act as de Souza's subject, collaborators and audience. The work has been made through collaboration and negotiation with residents and local artists (including Invani Lela Herlinana of the artistic collective Ketjil Bergerek who arranged the interviews and conducted the on-site translations, and musicians Senyawa who composed and performed the soundtrack, *Pawang Hantu*), while de Souza has also been dedicated to making a contribution back to the rich social life of the community (she hosted workshops for the kampungs' children, inviting them to draw their own ghost stories, and organised a community screening to premiere the video). At this video's screening, de Souza also unveiled another component of the work, an inflatable ghost house that's internal canopy had been decorated with embroideries of the children's drawings, and which created a dazzling and immersive glow-in-the-dark display when lit with UV torches. The project was met with delight by the children who exulted in the search for the pictures they made, while the event as a whole became a memorable and inspiring moment within the community who work resourcefully together with the limited resources that they have.

With elements of *If There's Something Strange In Your Neighbourhood...* now being presented as installation in subsequent exhibitions in Australia, de Souza's project exemplifies the potential of translating local narratives for global relevance, while making sure that a balance between the artist and the communities as shared stakeholders is maintained. Like the politics of space, ownership and generational change at the heart of the project, de Souza makes a persuasive case that the art of dealing with these exist in how the negotiations are handled.

**Susan Gibb  
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