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NTU CENTRE FOR  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART SINGAPORE

Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina

# The Ring of Fire

2014 - ongoing

13 April —  
11 June 2019

C

A

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY



My city is sinking, my country is burning,  
I don't want to spend my time in a white cube.

Irwan Ahmett  
Singapore, 28 March 2018

## THE RING OF FIRE (2014 – ongoing)

Invisible to the human eye, geological kinships flow under the oceans and lay deep into the earth's crust. When they manifest themselves, it is often in apocalyptic forms that disrupt existing ecosystems and the course of human life. In geography, The Ring of Fire denotes the volcanic belt and the collision zone of tectonic plates running around the edges of the Pacific Ocean, a deadly area where the majority of the world's earthquakes and eruptions occur. For Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina, this geologically unstable territory demarcates a field of artist inquiry.

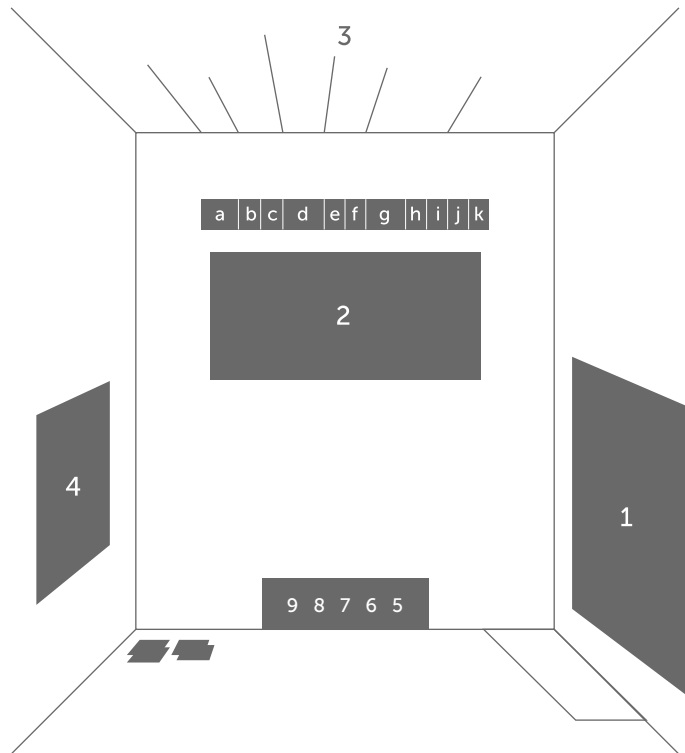
Since 2014, the Indonesian duo have embarked upon a journey that engages issues of social injustice, political struggles, colonial histories, and environmental crises encountered along erratic routes that stretch from Indonesia to New Zealand, from Taiwan and South Korea to Japan. *The Ring of Fire (2014 – ongoing)* brings together for the first time the most significant works realised by the artists, either together or individually, since the inception of the project. Fueled by an activist attitude and a zest for playfulness, Ahmett and Salina continuously share the imaginative resources to transpose political, environmental, and affective fractures in performative actions that are poetic and poignant at the same time. This presentation conveys the scope of their investigation by showcasing video documentation and material traces of their performances as well as a visual statement on the artists' working methodology.

## IRWAN AHMETT & TITA SALINA

An artist duo based in Jakarta, Indonesia, Irwan Ahmett (b. 1975) and Tita Salina (b. 1977) have been working together since 2010. Their ephemeral interventions articulate sharp social commentaries on urgent issues concerning urban development, ecological catastrophes, political repression, colonial legacies, and the exploitation of human and ecological resources.

Spanning from the prankish to the subversive, the duo can mobilise playfulness in the public sphere, irony in radioactive sites, and empathy in relation to conditions of human and environmental vulnerability. Their work has been exhibited at Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Japan (2018); Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland (2017); ST PAUL St Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand (2016); Biennale Jogja, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2015) amongst other international venues.

Ahmett and Salina were Artists-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore in March 2018.



### 1. GOTONG ROYONG, 2019

acrylic, marker, approx. 1.5 x 2.5 m

An Indonesian notion and a fixture of national identity with no equivalents in other languages, *gotong royong* denotes a common-cause principle: more than mutual aid, it is rather a communal attitude that generates actions aimed at a shared goal; a collaborative praxis premised on mutual trust that is geared towards the benefit of the community. Visualised as a hand-drawn diagram, the mural painting positions *gotong royong* at the heart of the artists' practice, while at the same time it traces and deconstructs its ideological uses and its recent exploitation for political branding purposes.

### 2. ZIARAH UTARA

(PILGRIMAGE TO THE NORTH)

2018 - ongoing

vinyl, 2.5 x 5.4 m

Since 2018, Ahmett and Salina conduct explorative walks on the north coast of Jakarta, a densely populated area with some of the world's most polluted canals and rivers. Due to land subsidence and increased sea level, the area has sunk four meters over the past three decades and is now increasingly exposed to floods that seriously threaten local communities, fishing farms and ports, boatyards, markets, and warehouses. The map shows the route followed by the artists as they observe and document appalling accumulations of waste and extreme living conditions.

## A

**AIR BALL, 2014**  
video, 5 min 41 sec

**1103 SUNSETS, 2014**  
video, 5 min

**MISSING PAIR, 2014**  
video, 1 min 56 sec

The contaminated area created by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster of March 2011 is turned into a field of artistic intervention. Venturing into the hazardous exclusion zone around the power plant, the artists perform a series of paradoxical and playful actions, such as the futile search for a lost shoe (*Missing Pair*), that address the irreversible consequences of the nuclear accident. In *Air Ball*, a sample of air collected from the radiation zone is snowballed all the way to Tokyo. Growing larger and larger along the way, the volatile ball becomes the engine for a participatory performance in the public space. *1103 Sunsets* is a collective clean-up performed in a nursing home in the city of Okuma,

Fukushima Prefecture, hastily abandoned after the radiation leaks. The artists cleaned and restored one room to its original state before the accident. At the time the project was made, 1,103 sunsets had elapsed since the disaster.

## B

**SALTING THE SEA, 2015**  
video, 9 min 17 sec

**LONGEVITY, 2015**  
video, 6 min 50 sec

Forced away from their country by faltering economy and crumbled infrastructures, 237,670 Indonesian migrants were reported as working in Taiwan as of 2015. Yet, the dream to change one's fortune can be frustrated by unfair treatment and brutal working conditions the result of which can prove to be fatal. *Salting the Sea* and *Longevity* revolve around two different cases of murder committed by Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan as a reaction to cruel mistreatment suffered at the workplace. The complex and excruciating consequences of economic

migrations sorely emerge in these two performances where the artists collect prayers and tears from the families of the convicted workers.

## C

**RESTITUTION OF 1755 2018**  
slideshow, sound

Ratified in 1755 against a backdrop of political intrigues, The Treaty of Giyanti (1755) is the birth certificate of the kingdom of Yogyakarta. It resulted from the Dutch East India Company's shrewd involvement in local feudal disputes and it became source of long-lasting agrarian conflicts. This version of a previous work titled *Restitution of 1755* (2015), features the reproduction of the treaty accompanied by a sound piece. The agreement is turned into a *pangkur* (poem), sung by a nine-year-old blind boy with the addition of two final verses warning the ruler not to oppress the peaceful life of his subjects.

## D

**INSEPARABLE FLAKES 2016**  
video, 4 min

**A LAND OF MILK AND HONEY, 2016**  
video, 6 min 13 sec

**180°, 2016**  
video, 2 min

Part of the artists' continuous investigation of the living conditions and broken bonds suffered by undocumented Indonesian migrant workers, *Inseparable Flakes* unfolds from the case of six migrant fishermen in Taiwan, sentenced to jail for murder, that was previously addressed in *Salting the Sea* (2015). Here, the artists make a fragile sheet of paper out of discarded skin flakes shed by the children of one fisherman and furtively deliver the letter in prison to their father. Both realised in New Zealand, *A Land of Milk and Honey* and *180°* address the predicament of Pacifika people displaced by the rise of sea level and the discrimination they suffer when forced to resettle in urban contexts.

## E

**MENGUSAP NURANI (STROKING THE CONSCIENCE) 2017**  
video, 3 min 28 sec

Traces of war histories are hidden in the caves of Okinawa, Japan, which were used as bunkers, hospitals, and shelters towards the end of WWII, at the same time of the Japanese occupation in Indonesia. A small stone taken from the caves is subject to the act of rubbing, an intimate ritual gesture that will extend over the years slowly altering its colour and shape. The stone will be exhibited in sacred caves across the Pacific region and, eventually, it will be returned to its original place.

## F

**TONG HWA – THE FLOWER CURRENCY 2017**  
video 6 min 48 sec

**ARUS BALIK, 2017**  
video, 3 min 55 sec

On occasion of Kim Il-sung's state visit to Indonesia in

1965, Sukarno named a violet orchid after the North Korean leader, a symbolic gesture meant to consolidate the political alliance between the two countries. In *Tong Hwa - The Flower Currency*, Ahmett and Salina overwrite this historical episode of floral diplomacy with the current predicament of Indonesian workers in South Korea injured from lack of safety on the workplace. *Arus Balik* is part of the artist's ongoing investigation of the major development project for the north coast of Jakarta. Due to unregulated urbanisation and underground water extraction, the low-lying capital of Indonesia is slowly sinking and has become increasingly vulnerable to floods. The development plan entails the eviction of coastal residents and threatens the livelihood of a large population of fishermen.

## G

**FAITH IN PAIN, 2018**  
video, 1 min 58 sec

A Vietnamese refugee in Japan ended his life by setting himself on fire. Torn by conflicting emotions, the

man's death notes reveal a deep sense of frustration after failed attempts to improve his living conditions in a foreign country. In the performance, Ahmett burns his own hands by pointing at the words of a poem composed out of the man's last words.

## H

**BERIBU BUDAK (A HOMOGRAPH WORD WITH TWO MEANINGS: SLAVE MOTHER AND THOUSANDS OF SLAVES), 2018**  
booklet, sound

A fan-shaped artificial island in southern Japan, Dejima was the only post open to foreign traders during the country's isolationist period (1603-1868) and it was used as a trading post by the Dutch from 1641 until 1853. Looking at the paintings of Kawahara Keiga (1786-1860) and the diaries of the Opperhoofden (Chiefs of the Dutch East India Company), Ahmett and Salina unearth the existence of slaves deported to the island from the Indonesian archipelago and the role they played in the enclave's everyday life.

## I

**NAME LAUNDERING 2018-19**

video, 1 hr 21 min

Taking issue with border enforcement measures produced under colonial, nationalistic, and capitalistic regimes, *Name Laundering* illustrates alternative strategies to enter Singapore. Performed for the first time during the artists' residency at the Centre in 2018, the lecture ended with Ahmett's *sumpah* (solemn pledge) not to return to Singapore as a consequence of troubling situations he personally experienced at the immigration checkpoint. The version shown here was performed at the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Japan, in January 2019.

## J

**HARVEST FROM ATLANTIS 2019**

video, 17 min 25 sec

Endemic to the Jakarta Bay, green mussels are a cheap source of protein available to the lower class.

Today, their ecosystem is jeopardised by uncontrolled house waste pollution as well as by the privatisation and development of the coastal line. In collaboration with local farmers who still practice communal life and traditional cultivation techniques, Ahmett and Salina "planted" underwater a makeshift wooden tree to grow mussels. Overlapping two environmental threats—deforestation and marine pollution—, *Harvest from Atlantis* expresses both hope and concern for the future.

## K

The last plinth is left empty to announce *A Tumbling Inch*, a performative action that will take place on 11 June 2019 in Batam, the Indonesian island closest to the Singaporean border. The performance will be broadcast live at the Centre.

## 3. THE RING OF FIRE: A TIMELINE

mixed media, 2.8 x 6.3 m

The timeline visualises the first five years of Ahmett and Salina's decade-long project, *The Ring of Fire*. Reminiscing a premodern consciousness when the passing of time was punctuated by natural events—eruptions, floods, earthquakes, draughts—rather than by abstract and standardised reckoning systems, the timeline is crowned with the indication of environmental and political events that spurred, or otherwise framed, the artists' work. Below, it aggregates a selection of material traces of the artists' impermanent set of performances and interventions along the Pacific Rim.

## 4. TITA SALINA

**1001ST ISLAND – THE MOST SUSTAINABLE ISLAND IN THE ARCHIPELAGO, 2015**  
video, 14 min 11 sec

Since 2014, Jakarta Bay has become the theatre of a colossal development project which includes the construction of The Giant Sea Wall and several artificial islands. The title of the work references Kepulauan Seribu (Thousand Islands), a string of hundreds of islands stretching offshore from Jakarta. Together with fishermen from Muara Angke, a coastal settlement endangered by the development,

Salina creates an artificial island made with marine debris plaguing the Bay.

## IRWAN AHMETT

**HISTORY SERIES, 2014 – 18**

Pitting official narrative against lived experience and collective memory, *History Series* is an ongoing series of performances conducted by Irwan Ahmett since 2014. Each act is staged on pivotal dates and engages with unresolved episodes of Indonesian post-colonial history. Objects and traces from the performances are displayed on the shelves alongside the video documentation.

## 5. GRAFFITI ON HISTORY, 2014

Typewritten manuscript on washi paper, 29.7 x 21 cm

The 1960s was a period of deep uncertainty, ghastly ideological battles, and momentous political shifts across Southeast Asia. Ahmett addresses the foundational act of the darkest moment in Indonesian contemporary history by certifying the existence of Supersemar (Order of Eleventh March), Sukarno's order that invested Suharto with unrestrained power after the killings of 1965-66. On the basis of that document, the original of which can no longer be found, Suharto overthrew Sukarno and established his three-decade regime.

## 6. SPATIAL HISTORY, 2015

video, 26 min 33 sec

The dematerialisation of art and the shift to textual practices emerged in the Euro-American scene in the 1960s. At the same time, a fateful transition of power occurred in Indonesia with Supersemar (1966), a decree that has since disappeared. Employing ephemerality as a strategy to counteract official narratives and the distortion of historical truths, at the end of the lecture, Ahmett unveils *The Non-Existent Monument of Supersemar*, an artistic statement typewritten on thermal paper.

## 7. AUTOPSY OF HISTORY, 2016

video, 44 min 18 sec

Challenging the propagandistic account of the purges of 1965-66, which resulted with the establishment of Suharto's New Order, the performance *Autopsy of History* took place for an invited audience and without publicity. The artist performs a post-mortem examination of vegetables, fruits, and flowers picked from mass grave sites and serves them to the audience without revealing their provenance.

## 8. PERMANENT SHADOW, 2017

video, 42 min 6 sec

*Treachery of G30S/PKI* is a 1984 feature-length film about the events leading to the 30 September Movement coup, commissioned by the New Order government. Aired on television on 30 September every year, the propaganda film was also a mandatory viewing for students. In this performance, Ahmett "materialises" the long shadow of a propagandistic tool that forcibly impressed a distorted version of history onto the minds of the population.

## 9. CONSTELLATION OF VIOLENCE, 2018

video, 1 hr 21 min

The assassination of six Indonesia Army generals on the night between 30 September and 1 October 1965 unleashed mass purges and political persecutions leading to the rise of Suharto. As of today, the official account of the event is challenged by the historians. In *Constellation of Violence*, Ahmett injects blood in the star alignments that were glowing over Jakarta that night to signal the urgency to illuminate its political circumstances.

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A research-intensive public university, NTU has 33,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in the colleges of Engineering, Business, Science, and Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and its Graduate College. NTU's campus is frequently listed among the top 15 most beautiful university campuses in the world and has 57 Green Mark-certified (equivalent to LEED-certified) buildings. Besides its 200-ha lush green, residential campus in western Singapore, NTU has a second campus in the heart of Novena, Singapore's medical district.

## NTU CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART SINGAPORE

Located in Gillman Barracks, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA Singapore) is a national research centre of Nanyang Technological University and is supported by a grant from the Economic Development Board, Singapore. The Centre is unique in its threefold constellation of RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC EDUCATION, EXHIBITIONS, and RESIDENCIES, engaging in knowledge production and dissemination. NTU CCA Singapore positions itself as a space for critical discourse and encourages new ways of thinking about *Spaces of the Curatorial* in Southeast Asia and beyond. The Centre's dynamic public programmes serve to engage with various audiences through lectures, workshops, open studios, film screenings, Exhibition (de)Tours, and Stagings. As a research centre, it aims to provide visiting researchers and curators a comprehensive study on the contemporary art ecosystem in Singapore and the region

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### Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina

The Ring of Fire (2014 – ongoing)

The Lab, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore  
13 April – 11 June 2019

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**Seet Yun Teng**, Curatorial Assistant, Residencies

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## IMAGE CAPTIONS

Cover—Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina, *Harvest from Atlantis*, photograph of performance, Jakarta, 2019.

Inside cover—Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina, *Autopsy of History*, photograph of performance, Berlin, 2017.

Flap—Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina, *Arus Balik*, photograph of performance, Jakarta, 2017.

All images courtesy the artists.





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