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A CONVERSATION WITH TROMARAMA

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…featuring The Charade, Unbelievable Beliefs, and *First Wave*

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Introduction

We first encountered Tromarama's work in Amsterdam when it was featured as a part of the Stedelijk Museum's Global Collaborations Project from June 12–September 6, 2015. Tromarama is an Indonesian art collective founded in 2006 by Febie Babyrose, Herbert Hans, and Ruddy Hatumena. The three met as art students in the early 2000s while attending the Bandung Institute of Technology. Best known for their stop-motion animation, Tromarama's works often combine video, installations, computer programming, and public participation depicting the influence of digital media on society and on perception of their surroundings. They live and work between Jakarta and Bandung.

Since that first encounter, we have been admirers of Tromarama's work, both for its technical merit—especially its use of handcrafted animation as an expressive medium in the age of ubiquitous digital media—and for its political and philosophical sophistication. It's hard to match their engagement with the social and political realities of South East Asia—financial capitalism, urban mobility, globalization, religious pluralism—in a way that is at once full of humor and play but also rich with biting critique, especially of the effects of global capitalism, digital culture, and urbanization. This overlap between play and critique proves incredibly productive: it challenges the viewer to undermine many of the dualisms that have crippled Western thought—between fiction and reality, mind and body, the spiritual and the material, the virtual and the actual—that seem less at home in Tromarama's practice. More than this, their playful engagement reveals an alternative world in which these Western binarisms are no longer at odds with one another.

Their refreshing take on media art is evident in all of the animations featured here. *The Charade* (2014) reanimates the "soulless" spaces of global transit—airports, trains, hotels, and so on—not by giving new life to its human traffic but by "ensouling" its luggage. Rolling through the urban architectures of capitalism, the film animates these objects and asks us to guess who they are and how they feel based on their exteriors and the environments through which they amble: a white bag sits forlorn on a bench, broken and dirty, perhaps homeless. A weathered orange case sits at a desk, motionless under bleak fluorescent lighting. It's covered in labels that are now worn and peeling, remnants perhaps of worldly travels in another lifetime; but now the orange case stares into the monotony of work. Tromarama's enlivened suitcases are tender and moving, a portrait of the baggage we cling to, reminders of our own alienation. They prompt us to ask all sorts of questions: How does modern life alienate us from others and from ourselves? Have we lost ourselves in the flow of capitalism? How has capitalism co-opted us and reshaped our identities? What's inside? Can we ever really know anyone? As we watch the suitcases roll through a world without humans, *The Charade* offers an opportunity to examine the present from the perspective of our moving baggage.

And herein lies the trick of animation: bringing otherwise still images to life through manipulation is a simple optical illusion. Stop motion doesn't compare in terms of the realism of other animation techniques (CGI, etc.). But that's just the point: the Western obsession with cinematic realism, with indexicality, and with believability undermine the surrealistic, and even magical, worlds revealed in their animated creations. While it's doubtful that Jan Švankmajer's or the Quay brother's animations have been compared to Tromarama's animations (yet), it seems to us the latter are similarly fascinated with the strange and even terrifying lives of the seemingly mundane world of objects. Suitcases appear to be animated by the horrific forces of global capitalism. And does this not ask us to reflect on our

own animation by these forces? Were Marx's observations in *Capital* right? If the commodity is *animated* by capital, then does this not include humans as well, since we too have been transformed into human capital, exchanged and transported across the globe through our likes, wants, and desires? Whatever the case, Tromarama's work doesn't just breathe life into things—it also shows how things breathe life into us, for better or worse.

Their work also seems to breathe life into art. *First Wave* (2015) negotiates the seemingly irreconcilable space between digital desire (consumerism, identity formation, and so on) and traditional Indonesian culture. The work consists of three screens, a portrait of each artist in the collective. Each of the faces in the triptych is animated by the quick succession of various objects superimposed upon the portraits. In the center portrait, Febie looks into the camera, directly addressing the viewer, but she is arranging her hair, and thus we realize that we are seeing her see herself in the all-too-familiar preparation for a "selfie." However, her selfie is run off course as scratches appear on her face, and then the artist becomes merely a torn photograph of herself. Now unrecognizable, her face morphs again into a kaleidoscope of eyes, demure, framed by soft hair. Digital iconography cycles across Ruddy's portrait, a cursor moves up and across, a throbber, the dreaded "loading circle"—itself an animation indicating a loading program—animates his face. Herbert's portrait tries to remain unaffected by the superimposed images; he playfully peeks through the images as if they were window blinds, addressing the viewer, or perhaps seeking an unobstructed view of himself. But then he disappears altogether behind supplicant hands, reaching toward a series of avatars. Intermittently, his face returns, only to be replaced periodically by a woman's, in the throes of pleasure. *First Wave* is a sort of triptych of selfies, the digital equivalent of a Christian altar painting or a Buddhist devotional. It is thus tempting to draw the conclusion that *First Wave* presents a picture of our demise. Lost behind waves of digital desires, we have corrupted ourselves and worship false idols. At the same time, it is not god but rather the artists before whom the viewer supplicates. *First Wave* also questions, then, the identity and role of the artists, as well as the role of art itself. Is art redemptive? Can it save us? Is there a sacredness to art? Who or what is the source of art's vitality?

Each of their works draws the spectator into the reality of the work and into the subjectivity of its objects. Exemplary of this technique is a film that is not included in this issue of *Techniques Journal*, *Mirage* (2016), a slow-motion film of a most quotidian act: making tea. We watch as the tea bag is dropped into the water by what we can only assume is an invisible hand. As soon as the bag touches the water, its pigments float out, extracted and released in an infusion ballet. We witness the magical transformation of dry leaves into a delicious beverage. Sugar is added, the grains cascade to the bottom of the glass. Finally, the spoon descends from above, and unexpectedly, it is not simply the ingredients of the cup being stirred but the entire film projection. Water, tea leaves, sugar, and viewer are stirred, spun in a dizzying displacement whereby we are one with the tea. The separation between art and viewer, subject and object are dissolved in their animations.

Finally, *Unbelievable Beliefs* (2012) straddles another dualism, but this time between urban modernity and the animist religions of traditional Indonesian culture. The piece traverses this complex space by following an animated fabric through Yogyakarta, an urban center that is still deeply indebted to animist spiritual practices. Although it seems at first that only the green swatch of fabric is animated, as it traverses the city, it has the effect of animating the environment it interacts with. We watch the green fabric dance through the city, along sidewalks and rooftops, up stairways and down alleyways, its movements punctuated by the minimal percussive sound track, an urban choreography. Even those unfamiliar with Indonesian politics and the rapid transformation of its urban landscapes cannot fail to see how the fabric draws connections between the fabric of our lives and the urban environment. The artists have become concerned with the effects of a booming economy and new class divisions across Indonesia. New wealth is followed by new construction and consumerism: malls, high rises, and gentrification open up the city to new challenges. *Unbelievable Beliefs* animates the often invisible but always already interactive urban environment, the divisions and uncertainties animating the fabric of urban life in Indonesia. The question in Tromarama's animation often becomes, Who is animating whom? Do their animations invent worlds or visualize a real but invisible world that already exists? There is a way in which Tromarama's work explores the relationship between the animator and animated, the source of vitality, and thus elides the normative binarism between them.

We have chosen to feature select pieces from Tromarama's extensive body of work in this issue of *Techniques Journal* to showcase how animation can be used as a *technique* to engage the political, social, and metaphysical complexities of the contemporary world. What's especially germane about their work is how the technique of stop-motion animation is used to blur the boundaries between the modern world and the animistic one. What Tromarama has managed to do, which in some ways exemplifies what this special issue is all about, is demonstrate how animation is both a technical and metaphysical practice: animation and animism, technology and spirituality, are brought together in their works.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

The history of art in Indonesia is really interesting, with its vibrant traditions of avant-garde, radical, and oppositional political art, as well as meaningful ethnic, religious, and socially engaged art. Sadly, there is not a lot of recognition in the West (even in nearby Australia) of what's happening in Indonesian art. We're curious about how you see the state of the art scene (including art education) in Indonesia today and how you position yourself within it.

Tromarama:

As the infrastructure of Indonesia's visual art scene is still developing, most of the progress comes from the grassroots—artists' initiative spaces, local communities, and private institutions. Since the 90s, more Indonesian artists (as individuals or collectives) began spreading across the region and expanding to Europe and the US. There is documentation—archives and writings about Indonesian art history—but it's still minimal. And much of the material has not been translated to other languages yet, making it harder for a wider public to access it.

While art infrastructure is decentralized, we are still struggling to decentralize art education so that it doesn't only focus on Java, especially particular cities, such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta. These cities have their own institutions of art education. The three of us are lucky to have this privilege. We grew up in Jakarta and studied in Bandung, where the infrastructure is already much more developed compared to other cities in Indonesia.

The internet can obviously overcome the obstacle of distance across the archipelago to spread knowledge and build networks. It started to blossom across the country in the mid-2000s, but again not every region has the same infrastructure to support easy public internet access.

There's a lot of work to do. The art ecosystem is always moved by the militant spirit of its inhabitants, which makes it alive and more exciting at the same time.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Are there any especially exciting arts-based initiatives that are decentralizing art education in Indonesia? We also wonder about institutions of art education and whether you foresee the emergence of more informal sites of education taking shape or whether more traditional institutional frameworks (the university, the art academy, etc.) will continue to determine the course of the arts.

Tromarama:

For a long period of time, art has been taught informally in Indonesia. We call this approach *Sanggar*. By definition, it is a space run by a community or an artist where any individual could learn directly about artmaking. Sanggar has a longer history than any formal art education institution that exists in Indonesia today.

The current example of art education that exists outside traditional institutional frameworks is Gudskul. It's a public learning space run by various art collectives in Jakarta. The school specifically offers a study on artistic practice based on collective and collaborative effort. Though the Gudskul's existence can be traced back to Sanggar, its vision is totally different. Sanggar typically produces individual artists, whereas Gudskul aims to generate more art collectives. The latter model has flourished in the last twenty years. We think this type of knowledge sharing works better, as it is less hierarchical and bureaucratic. And also

this type of learning process finds its urgency nowadays due to its organic process, openness, and its ability to operate without attachment to any particular physical space.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

The Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against the killing of George Floyd in the US have reached all the way to Indonesia with the Papuan Lives Matter movement. The racial injustices, the discrimination, and the social and economic disadvantage of Papuans in Indonesia and African-Americans in the US are similar in many ways. Their histories and goals are different, of course, but the movements have much in common. While your work doesn't directly address issues of race and racism, it seems that since your more recent work focuses on social media platforms, the human rights abuses in West Papua and the #PLM movement could not have escaped your notice. Do you see any overlaps between the way in which you're thinking about social media and how the #PLM movement is taking shape?

Tromarama:

Until 1998 and the fall of President Soeharto, almost all the news consumed by the public was monitored by the government. The arrival of the internet and social media in Indonesia made a huge impact in terms of how information is created and distributed. Every individual could become a news generator. Today the three of us rarely watch the national television anymore. Social media has become one of our sources for knowing what is going on nowadays. It can spark a new perspective—different from the government's official narrative—on current issues, such as the Papuan Lives Matter movement. One of the problems with this platform is how fast its content shifts. The surplus of reality is experienced, and then it becomes inflated. Reality is merely an image that relies on its spectators.

Social media spread the awareness of #PLM really fast, but the movement never really manifested into physical reality like the Black Lives Matter movement, which is still happening on the streets today. Of course the people producing and consuming social media couldn't apprehend the complexity of the Papua issue in a short time. Just like any other platform that offers a lot of framing for any particular issue, social media itself became a never-ending race to claim the "correct" interpretation of reality.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

This brings up a really complex set of tensions. On the one hand, Indonesians were under the thumb of a government that tightly controlled the narrative and the dissemination of information; and then, on the other hand, a new artifice took shape: everyone became a "news generator." It seems that this is a history of information awash in fictionalization, propaganda campaigns, tailored stories, etc. As artists who work with social media and who are generators of useful fiction, how do you navigate these complexities? Is there an ethics of artifice?

Tromarama:

We think that every artifice has ethics. The question is what constitutes this ethics, where does it come from, what is the agenda of its producers, and who will benefit if this ethics is applied. This set of questions is important for examining different values and beliefs. The battle while making the works is always how to avoid any possible bias that deviates from or even contradicts the first intention.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

There is a tension that we see in your work (which admittedly might only appear when it is shown in the West, viewed by Westerners) between, on the one hand, animation as a technical medium that (as you have joked before) allows you to "play God," that is, to make inanimate things appear to be alive and draw attention to the "illusions of life"; and on the other hand, the indigenous animistic traditions, which maintain that objects *do* have life, that they are "ensouled," and thus one cannot say that the life wasn't there all along, at least in some way. Therein lies the joke, right? What do you make of this tension between the reception of your work in Eastern and Western contexts? And how the role (either explicit or implicit) of animism operates in your animations?

Tromarama:

We were raised by our parents and society with lots of myths that inhabited our surroundings. In our childhood, our parents would tell us to finish our rice, or the rice might cry afterwards. As teens, girls are warned to not sit in front of the door, or it will be difficult for them to meet their future husband. As adults, we still hear that some people bury a buffalo head in the ground before they build their house as a symbolic request for permission from the ancestors. Unconsciously this way of life affects how we view the world and all the material that shapes it. As we personally began viewing the world more critically, we found distance from all these beliefs. We have more perspective on how to see these beliefs and try to read between the lines on how they still function in our society today.

When we present our work in other countries, it encounters other contexts; we see this as a way to show other worldviews, especially the one that applied in our daily life. In our animation, animism has a role as the continuity of souls and the discontinuity of bodies.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Is this what you were trying to explore in *Unbelievable Beliefs* and *The Charade*? Especially in the latter piece, it seems as though the spaces of global transit you showcase are prime examples of the "soulless" spaces of global capitalism, and yet you seem to breathe new life into these spaces, finding continuity across them.

Tromarama:

Both works problematize the universality that globalization carries, where on the other hand representation becomes the main course. They stand on that paradox and try to ignite awareness of what lies beneath those green fabrics and inside those suitcases.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

We're interested in your work's relationship to (post)colonialism. The Netherlands colonized Indonesia during the sixteenth century and maintained their presence there until the 1960s. It is perhaps not a coincidence that we first encountered your work in 2015 in the Netherlands. Your installation at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam was part of the Global Installations program (curated by Jell Bouwhuis and Bart van der Heide), which was a three-year collaboration between the Stedelijk and its project space SMBA. The Stedelijk's website states that the Global Installations project was about "internationalizing contemporary arts with a focus on emerging regions," and the goal was to promote equality and exchange of knowledge in collaborations between Western and non-Western artists. The museum's text declares that the work is about globalization and capital. Can you tell us about how Dutch imperialism shows up in your work, either explicitly, as is the case

with *Ons Aller Belang* (2012) or *Amsterdamse Poort Batavia* (2014), or more implicitly through the lasting effects of postcolonialism?

Tromarama:

We moved to Bandung from Jakarta to go to university in 2002/2003. The city has a lot of landmarks that were built by the Dutch during the colonial era. After ten years of living there, we saw these monuments start to be demolished one by one. Developers replaced them with new buildings. This phenomenon triggered us to question the role of history as a mirror of who we are today. History is merely treated as a souvenir. It is passed on from one to another as a story divorced from its concrete legacy. After all, identity is always a problematic as well as a complex issue.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Even though *First Wave* does not address the history of colonialism directly, there seems to be an important sense in which the piece addresses the complex relation between online desire (consumerism, identify formation, and so on) and more traditional conceptions of Indonesian history and culture. Could you say a bit more about this complexity and how it shows up in the video installation?

Tromarama:

First Wave came out of our anxiety as we looked at how digital screens have become dominant in our daily life. We've been exposed to the acceleration of images; it recalibrates all the values and beliefs that we carry along in our life. There's a struggle to find our own existence—we are passive in experiencing this flow of never-ending information. In a split second we could be part of the global virtual community, where values are looser and more adjustable. The next second, we're struggling to find our own voice within the social construction that we have become part of in our daily lives.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Is there a shift in focus to your work? You became known for your stop-motion animations, but since 2016, Tromarama has produced few of these. It seems that your practice has taken a shift and expanded into building installations like *Soliloquy* (2018), a light orchestra, and a different type of orchestra in *Beta* (2019). Many of your recent pieces, like the *Wave Forecast* (2018) and *Living Apparatus* series (2019), are centered on social media, or internet-based data visualization, as is the case with *Domain* (2019) and *Madakaripura* (2020). However, one might say that the work is still very focused on animation; it is only that something different is being animated (e.g., the printer and its messages are animated through sound and movement, or information flows are animated with color). How would you characterize the role of animation in your early work versus your more recent work, and do you see it as a shift or as perfectly consistent?

Tromarama:

After exploring animation for ten years, we arrived at a point where we asked what animation is for us. As well, the internet had become massive in Indonesia. Beginning in 2015, we tried to look at how this medium affects us on a daily basis. The invisible presence of algorithms in our reality on the mobile screen raises the question of the state of our consciousness. Many people in our surroundings tend to perceive whatever appears on their smartphone screen as the truth. Through our works we try to widen the gap between people and the reality on the screen.

We are intrigued by the fact that when we explore social media or feed something into the platform, it is like we are writing a script that afterwards is simulated by an algorithm—

and we are also the one who is performing our own script within the reality that the algorithm directs. We see this as a turning point where we shift our approach to animation. We're sharing the authorship of the work with other people on the virtual platform or with other entities, such as temperature or wind speed, in the form of input data.

Data are like artifacts of human activity in the digital platform. We see it as if they have their own energy that we can elaborate to become another form of performance.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

So, would you say that your work is still deeply informed by animation, although now, you're thinking about how algorithms animate social and political existence? Algorithms as the animating/ensouling force in our media?

Tromarama:

True. Though algorithms start to orchestrate our consciousness, we shouldn't forget that there is an "animator" behind these codes. There are agendas behind all of these codes. As we mentioned before, we need to examine that first. Today it is a really hard task to track where our consciousness comes from.

Stacey Moran:

The Charade (2014) was the first work of yours I encountered. I was mesmerized and must have watched it at least three times in a row and then probably ten more times after that first encounter. As I watched the suitcases rolling along in empty spaces of global transit, I felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness, isolation, and alienation but also, maybe, validation? And then surprisingly, these poignant scenes were punctuated at times with humor. What I felt so overwhelmingly as I watched *Charade* was my own humanity being reflected back to me. Another of my favorite works is *Mirage* (2016), in which we observe something so simple, so mundane—the steeping of a teabag—as if it were a profound work of art, a symphony or ballet; but suddenly (surprisingly and cleverly), the viewer becomes a part of this swirling ballet in the glass. When people say that your work "animates" objects, this is kind of an understatement. I marvel at the way these incredibly emotional qualities are conveyed through a variety of film techniques. And I imagine that these techniques are incredibly laborious: involving time-consuming repetition and attention to the most extraordinary details and subtleties that most of us don't ever notice. How would you characterize the relationship between the animation techniques you use and their capacity for animating our relationship to objects?

Tromarama:

We think the fiction that attaches to the objects has more power to animate our life than the actual objects themselves. The way we approach objects in our works is to alter the fiction already embedded in the object or to create another fiction that has potential to become the new currency.

We tend to select an object that has a life span or duration as a material. For example, fireworks, candles, and plants. We like to play with the linear logic that is usually applied when we experience physical reality and virtual reality. We like to display the continuous material transformation from moving image to object. When the character transforms into an object, it follows the nature of physical law. Then it transforms back into a moving image.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Then how do you see your role as artists? These transformations are brought about through your careful intervention into the "fictions" embedded in objects. These fictions are powerful and have the power to transform us. This makes us think about your work as somewhat analogous to a shamanistic practice, if only in the sense that you're capable of communicating between both worlds, and as such you gauge the appropriate dosage of the "real" and the "fictional," the "physical" and the "virtual" in order to generate the desired effect.

Tromarama:

We see artists as cultural brokers. Every work has the potential to unbox the dominant fiction by proposing another fiction in its own way. We choose to walk on this thin ice that separates the real and the fictional, since it has greater power to shake dominant beliefs.

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Febie Babyrose, ***Ruddy Hatumena***, **and** ***Herbert Hans*** (they/them/their): Tromarama (http://tromarama.com)