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[Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [Reviews](#) > [Talk Is Action](#)

## Talk Is Action

### Panic Buttons – Culture and Crisis in Malaysia and the Region: Analysing the conditions within which we are forced to endure

by Benjamin McKay  
 15-06-2006

**There will be** some among you who believe that talking about problems, about crises and about rights is a passive act. All talk, no action. I disagree with those sentiments. Talk, conversation, dialogue, argument and general discourse ARE actions. Identifying problems and the responses to those problems are important diagnostic activities too. A surgeon does not cut you open without knowing what it is they are looking for. Likewise artists and activists need to theoretically and critically analyse the conditions within which they are forced to endure. It can also be a cathartic experience as anyone would have ascertained had they heard the 'public' responses to these issues at the public forum called **Panic Buttons – Culture and Crisis in Malaysia and the Region** at The Actors Studio Bangsar last Sunday (11 June 2006). It ended a preceding two-day Roundtable Forum on "Crisis, Performance, Rights" at Valentine Willie Fine Art.

Given the recent and regular crackdowns on artistic practice and expression here in Malaysia it was timely that this regional gathering took place here in Kuala Lumpur. It was organised by Ray Langenbach, Sharaad Kuttan (Malaysian intellectuals), Lee Weng Choy and Paul Rae (Singaporean intellectuals). They brought together art practitioners, writers, activists, filmmakers and academics from around the region, all sharing stories surrounding moments of actual crisis in the arts from Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma. These case studies were contextualised and reflected upon in a rigorously engaged manner, and in a spirit of regional and creative solidarity. The two events over three days attempted to answer, among others, the following questions:

What is crisis? Are crises orchestrated? What happens when an artist or a work of art is situated at the centre of a crisis – perceived or actual – that is orchestrated by second and third party players? Are these crises initiated as part of a larger and more insidious agenda? Is the state the only censor? What might a cultural worker do in response to such attacks? How can communities of practitioners across the region galvanise to support the integrity of the artist and the artwork when a

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Kathy Rowland & Lee Weng Choy



Sharaad Kuttan & Goenawan Mohamad



Chumpon Apisuk & Yap Sau Bin



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work is arbitrarily banned or when the broader human rights of an artist are imperilled or withdrawn by state, institutions or individuals within the broader social fabric?

## Rupture: "There is no real social fabric"

The first workshop at the two-day roundtable discussion was 'Rupture' which was chaired by Ray Langenbach. The organisers utilised the theoretical modelling of anthropologist Victor Turner's "social drama" and the manner in which crisis emerges from a recognisable breach within the social fabric. It was a model that proved fruitful, even when it was critiqued as it was by doyenne of Indonesian literature and thought Goenawan Mohamad, who found the bias towards a formalised social fabric to be at best problematic.

It is an interesting question to have asked. Is there a recognisable social fabric that can indeed be ruptured? Goenawan was concerned that the term in fact hides something more serious and that ultimately "there is no real social fabric in the first place." To give that argument some concrete support he cited in detail the broader implications of the proposed Anti-Pornography Bill in Indonesia, of the campaign against it and the multiple sites of contestation that surround it. Rather than a homogenous social fabric that is occasionally transgressed producing such crises, there are, he argued, competing sectors within society who struggle to either maintain or oppose larger hegemonies. His analysis also touched upon a recurrent theme of the three-day event when he talked about the power of language, and of the need to reappropriate and reignite meaning that has been otherwise subverted for hegemonic and perhaps sometimes sinister purposes.

The personal accounts of 'rupture' – of censorship and bans and acts of creative defiance were grounded firmly in Malaysia with the testimonies by Amir Muhammad surrounding the chronology of events leading up to the arbitrary ban of his film *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, from Arahmaini about her sense of fear and vulnerability following the closure of the Satu Kali event in Kuala Lumpur recently and from Fahmi Fadzil who spoke about the state/federal battle over the banning of Mak Yong and other traditional Malay arts in the state of Kelantan. The question of the arbitrary nature of most censorship within the region was reiterated a number of times by Weng Choy who claimed that the act of censorship is ALWAYS arbitrary.

## Reaction: The new democracy

The next workshop, chaired by Paul Rae, further explored what a crisis may actually mean while giving shape to a variety of differing possible responses. Indonesian writer Laksmi Pamuntjak gave a valuable account of how she personally responded to the attacks and physical threats of religious extremists on Utan Kayu in Jakarta. She also spoke of the problems inherent in getting information out to the wider community about what is happening on the site of crisis.



John Pang & Jennifer Lindsay



The audience



Keiko Sei & Fathi Aris Omar

The workshops and public forum engaged positively with the idea of what might constitute a 'public' and how that 'public' engages with works of art, with state hegemonies and with other ruptures created by non state institutions and forces. The 'public' is itself a vague and problematic construction, grounded in the falsehood of generics and defying ultimately attempts at homogeneity, and therefore of course broad based consensus. Can we start to imagine a series of shifting publics that have a porous fluidity about what they might at any given time be made up of?

There was amongst the round table participants an accord when it came to the argument that states create crisis in order to maintain their hegemonic supremacy. The creation or production of crisis is in itself a performative act. Raiding black metal concerts, banning exhibitions on world religions, cancelling screenings of films at FINAS and not protecting the free assembly of people gathered to discuss Article 11 are in a sense all orchestrated acts of crisis that serve to not only engender fear, but to bolster the hegemony of shifting power bases. The state falls back on a defence of its hard won status quo.

Kathy Rowland also pointed out the interesting shift away from direct state censorship. She mentioned that the Malaysian state has actually not banned a theatrical performance – not before the play's opening night anyway – since the ban on *Madam Mao's Memories* in 1990. Now the municipal or the federal bans or closes a performance based upon a complaint or objection by one or more members of the 'public'. The state has so successfully produced a sense of perpetual crisis – that 'we, the nation' are under constant attack from 'the West', secularism and communism, to name but three – that it no longer needs to generate the crises itself. Broader society has internalised this fear and state generated crisis and now many feel capable of serving that state as self appointed moral guardians. Caught in the middle are art practitioners, filmmakers, writers and so forth whose claims for freedom of expression and the right to articulate difference are smothered by a newly self-righteous 'democracy'. This new 'democracy' claims it responds to the concerns of the 'public' even if that public is perhaps a public of just one person. As is the case with the banning of Amir Muhammad's *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, a truly Monty Python-esque affair. But it remains ultimately a state generated crisis even if the trigger was the campaign of one particular journalist who manipulated his coverage to create a perceived campaign of opposition. In fact, this crisis appears only to further highlight divisions within the ruling elites, if not within the ruling party.

### **Rites, Reflections, Resolution, Renewal: The failure of criticism**

The third workshop, 'Rites and Reflections', chaired by Lee Weng Choy of Singapore's The Substation, acknowledged that rites (as opposed to 'rights') have an important role in both maintaining the status quo as well as in generating possible change. It was premised on the idea that certain institutions such as universities perform a series of rites – such as the

articulation and preservation of liberal values. But such institutions are increasingly hampered in their capacity to use those rites to generate change and are often sidelined when it comes to responding to crisis.

The idea of reflexion therefore signifies the possibilities and potential of intellectual activism. This workshop explored such things as what constitutes a critical imagination. It looked at the failure, in contemporary culture and society, of the performance of criticism per se and its apparent inability to truly engage with the greater public. Particularised case studies again proved useful for this discussion and the session itself was a particularly good segue into Sharaad Kuttan's open roundtable discussion on 'Resolution/Renewal'. How do we respond? How do we actively engage with the public? What new ways of strategising could we think about? Can we give new life to old strategies and methods of action and activism? How can we build bridges to other activist networks? How do the problems faced by cultural practitioners impact upon or relate to the broader rights issues of women, workers and other sectors of society who also feel that they experience crisis and rupture when confronted with hegemony and ruptures within a perceived social fabric? What role can the media play in these crises and how is the media complicit in crisis generation?

### **Public Forum: More than mere talk**

The answer to the question of how one might actively engage with the public was given a performative and concrete response last Sunday when a panel from the roundtable addressed a public meeting at the Actors Studio at Bangsar. Hosted with considerable panache by intellectual Sharaad Kuttan, the panellists Kathy Rowland, Thai artist-activist Chumpon Apisuk, Goenawan Mohamad, translator and scholar Jennifer Lindsay, Lee Weng Choy, Malaysian artist Yap Sau Bin and PR consultant John Pang collectively distilled much that was discussed in the previous two days and opened that discussion up to the public for their critical engagement.

If I were to characterise the mood of a Malaysian 'public' who gave up a sunny Kuala Lumpur afternoon to deal with some very serious and current issues then I might just mention three other words that begin with the letter 'R' – Race, Religion and Rights. Matters of identity, or rather perceived threats to identity, are often the triggers of crisis. In Malaysia, the very contested notions of identity that are so thoroughly laced with the inherent complexities of your own bountiful diversity lie at the heart of such contestations – ethnicity, religion and class mixed together with all the apparent divisions that indeed lie within each one of those rubrics. This dynamic and somewhat fluid state of affairs appears to be governed and controlled largely by a desire to keep it all perpetually static. The ruptures and responses are perhaps spat out occasionally and then the bruises are later concealed to fester below the surface in the sanctuary of fear and marginality. While the current state and cultural hegemony might appear divided, even fractured, it does however appear to be resolute in maintaining its hegemonic status and a semblance of the status quo.

There was some debate as to whether there was an active and cohesive arts community here at all and an equally interesting argument that a networked community all working together is not necessarily either achievable or desirable – the community itself is diverse and the creation of a united front has the potential to become another institutionalised power base that could itself exclude and marginalise. A commitment has been made by the organisers to continue the dialogue further and to begin a process of monitoring and disseminating information to fellow practitioners and activists when a particular incident arises in a particular place. This is a sound and proactive outcome.

The audience appeared pleased to be able to articulate their fears, their desires and their uncertainties – not just with a crisis in the culture of the land as is so demonstrably evident in the recent attacks on the arts – but also with the discourses on power, hegemony, place, space and control. It was a healthy thing to witness people discussing these issues and listening to each other. It was more than just mere talk – it was a sharing and a convergence and confluence of ideas that gave people a chance to proactively utilise their right to democratic spaces while also articulating their positions. It might not save the next film that is arbitrarily banned, the next book that does not get published, nor will it safeguard the rights of artists and performers to break new ground and to tread where others wished they wouldn't. What this meeting achieved was an informed and articulate defence of diversity and difference and an affirmation of the importance of art and culture to the health of a society and of a nation.

To those who practice moral policing and censorship and to those who support such actions, Panic Buttons proved that you are not speaking for everyone. Demonstrating that proof was indeed action and I look forward to seeing more critically informed public engagements throughout the region in the near future.

~ ~ ~

**Panic Buttons was organised as a local prelude to *Performing Rights: the 12th Annual Conference of Performance Studies International (PSi)* to be held at Queen Mary University of London from 15 – 18 June. This South East Asian chapter is supported by Valentine Willie Fine Art, The Actors Studio Bangsar, Kakiseni.com and Singapore's The Substation.**

Benjamin McKay is finalising his PhD dissertation on Malay film history and in 2006 is lecturing at Monash University Malaysia at Sunway.

**User Comments:**

**Another Karen Armstrong's book banned**

Thu, Jun 15 2006 23:20:50

What happens now?

Malaysiakini

Jun 15, 06 7:27pm

Renowned author Karen Armstrong's book 'The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam' has been slapped with a ban by the government.

(More on the Malaysiakini website)

posted by Fahmi Fadzil [fahmi\\_fadzil@yahoo.com](mailto:fahmi_fadzil@yahoo.com)

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**Performing a Crisis**

Fri, Jun 16 2006 15:10:03

Ah... would've loved to have been there... but alas I promised a friend to go shopping in IKEA and ended up listening to his bedroom adventures. LOL.

Talking is fun. But more and more I feel it's kind of prolonging the sense of exasperation felt within the intellectual/arts circles. Perhaps the forum acted as a sort of "safe space" to recreate the "ohmigod" reactionary psycho-emotional state that we have come to regard with a kind of sarky affection.

My personal take is that it's kind of nice to be in a state of unease, so much so that we secretly desire it. If the art neither pricks nor evinces strong reactions from its intended (or unintended audience), then is it really doing its job? LOL.

Which brings me to this, was this forum a "performance"? In which the speakers are acting out, in an improvised manner (under the rubric that they are not), archetypes of characters in a highly-devised state of panic caused by an unseen enemy?

Ben, your write-up almost seemed like the review of a play. LOL. But it is a "performance", isn't it?

posted by Jadual Kelapa [hujan.haram@gmail.com](mailto:hujan.haram@gmail.com)

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**small error?**

Sat, Jun 17 2006 04:20:14

"Raiding black metal concerts, banning exhibitions on world religions..."

i think that should be "raiding gigs and calling them black metal concerts".

posted by just checking [anal@speller.com](mailto:anal@speller.com)

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**.....shock**

Sun, Jun 18 2006 00:14:04

It is sad to hear from a country like Malaysia (who happens to have no more debt in World Bank) to actually censor the artistic articulation of its people. Culture and arts define a country.....

posted by Me [me@mememe.com](mailto:me@mememe.com)

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**sorry - just checking**

Sun, Jun 18 2006 14:44:04

I apologise for having used the label 'Black Metal' in mentioning the raids on gigs - you are quite right to correct me - the label was given by the police and many sectors of the media and was not used by the artists or promoters. My sincerest apologies.

posted by benjamin [benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au](mailto:benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au)

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**wished i could have been there**

Mon, Jun 19 2006 11:19:27

Tuan Benjamin McKay you have again written a very interesting article. Such a serious issue. I only wished I could have been there. So sad to have missed it. I always look forward to your articles too by the way.

posted by fazli [equinox@gmail.com](mailto:equinox@gmail.com)

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### knowledge & lack of it

Mon, Jun 19 2006 13:14:30

I'd have loved to attend the forum myself but I'd neglected to take my weekly dose of kakiseni at the time it was announced. Interestingly, why wasn't this forum announced in the media?

The emergence of 'self-appointed moral guardians' in Malaysia is definitely worrying. It would be interesting to look at the causes, and why lately there have been a couple of questionable statements from religious authorities suggesting a trend towards extremism.

What frustrates me most, however, is how quite a few people will succumb to this attitude because it is easier to let other people do the thinking for you. A process I call the "bodoh-ization" of one's self through the lack of knowledge and a critical mind. Halting this process is important too if we want to stop arbitrary censorship and moral-policing. (p/s: I cannot be accused of all talk and no action either because educating the nation's finest happens to be my job).

posted by aishah a [snodgrasz@yahoo.com](mailto:snodgrasz@yahoo.com)

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### artist therapy

Tue, Jun 20 2006 10:03:53

yes, why wasn't it mentioned in the media? The author himself writes the word public in inverted commas. the Malaysian art scene lacks sufficient platforms for discussions and dialogue, yes, and its great that people -artists- can get together like this, but it never seems to amount to more than an outpouring of woes. Although this session DOES sound particularly informative. Rarely, though, if ever, does it engage the PUBLIC. And what IS the action as a result? I'm not just being antagonistic, I really want to know. Was the session transcribed/recorded in any way? Will there be a publication? At least create some wider awareness and have some intention for further study...We're not going to learn from ephemera. Someone please tell me where to get off.

posted by cynic sometimes [notthepublic@yahoo.com](mailto:notthepublic@yahoo.com)

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### in reply to the above

Tue, Jun 20 2006 12:51:46

Hi 'cynic sometimes'

You have asked some valid questions that I hope I can answer.

I cannot speak for the mainstream media, but I am aware that media outlets were notified re the Public Forum and that many blog sites ran with the news too. Naturally as a co-organiser kakiseni.com covered it and I was aware that there were several reporters who attended the Forum at the Actors Studio.

I placed the word public in inverted commas to highlight the fact that the 'public' itself is a contested entity - something that was discussed several times during the three days. Indeed at the public Forum there were divergent opinions and attitudes which again highlights the falseness of speaking about the public as a homogenous entity with a shared consensus. The problems of artists and companies addressing those publics was a topic of the Forum and a degree of clever strategising was shared by people from around the region.

The organisers plan to follow this event up in other centres in the region and to build a loose network of artists, critics and intellectuals who both monitor crises and strategise those events. Some who attended the Forum here in KL went on to London to share these findings and discussions with a global audience at Performing Rights - the 12th Annual Conference of Performance Studies International held at Queen Mary University, June 15-18. Publications will arise from that conference.

While the workshops and the Public Forum were more than "a pouring out of woes", I still contend that some of that woe needs to be poured out on occasion - that it was then focussed on possible outcomes and solutions and that those ideas were shared is a positive and active step in the right direction.

I trust that Kakiseni will keep readers informed of follow up events and activities.

posted by benjamin [benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au](mailto:benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au)

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### Excercising My Right

Tue, Jun 20 2006 17:09:02

Let me first admit that I did not read the article above, I do not intend to criticize or praise it.

But reading the Headline and the Bold fonts, i get a gist of whats going on here.

Talk is indeed action. But its who you're talking to that counts. There is a trend among activists and artsy fartsies.

The trend is that when they do the talking its usually among themselves. Did it ever occur to you that things can be more conducive if the information flow wasnt one way.. the activist way that is.

There are those whom you criticize who are willing to not debate but talk with you and not against you when you guys are talking about rights and so on so forth.

Personally you must be thinking that who am I to say such things. Well i used to help out at Food Not Bombs, and I would Love to continue helping.

But ever since I un-subscribed from the ideology of anarchism and leftist politics. I feel a little uncomfortable.

I digress, anyway I wont say I've walked the walk and talked the talk, but i know i cant stand the selfishness of leftist activist style politics which assumes other people dont know whats going on and therefore what they say can be

discredited.

And its not just about rights dude, what about duty. Duty to your brothers and sisters man and they dont just need food and other material needs they need spirituality too, cause we are not made of iron and stone, rigidity of ideology cannot replace belief.

Every movement, ideology, and faith that survives till this day have their basis, because and oppressive and false one would not last the century.

So I think its about time every one got their say.. and mind you there are extremists on boths sides of the spectrum, so those who speak for any faith, ideology or movement must therefore be moderate.

Thank YOu for reading my rant even if you didnt want too. Peace be with you.

posted by Hello [Yup@ok.com](mailto:Yup@ok.com)

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### pressing the right button

Tue, Jun 20 2006 18:08:56

FYI, Oriental Daily has a full page feature of the Panic Buttons forum yesterday.

posted by left button [check@media.com](mailto:check@media.com)

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### Dear Hello

Tue, Jun 20 2006 19:26:07

I was more than happy to read your "rant" as you put it. I am just sorry that you did not return the courtesy and read my article. You said that as you didn't actually read the report above on the Forum that took place that you "do not intend to criticize or praise it." A sound position.

But then you do criticise it. You even mention who I might have criticised in the apparently unread article.

The Forum was not about one politics, one ideology, one viewpoint - neither the workshops nor the public meeting that took place to conclude it were like that at all. You appear to be ascribing 'leftist' and 'anarchist' labels to either myself or the participants of the Forum. Such a statement is ill-informed and you cast your net far too widely. It is just a shame that you were unable to attend the Public Forum. You were indeed invited.

Rights do have a relationship with 'duty' as you put it. But duty should perhaps not supercede a defence of rights. Human rights are institutionalised across nations, races, classes and creeds. Malaysia and other nations in the region are signatories to those rights. I am appauled at the abuse of the rights of Muslims to practice their faith in peace and tolerance anywhere - including in Iraq and in the former Yugoslavia. We all need to have Human Rights protected. If rights and duties appear to conflict then let us create a dialogue whereby such an engagement can build bridges rather than destroy them.

And yes, people need spirituality. No where in any of my writings or in any of my work have I ever argued otherwise. But then you would not know that as you have not actually read my work, or at least this article. I too have my personal faith - and I too would hope that others would respect my right to that faith. Indeed a great number of artists, writers, performers and intellectuals are people of profound religiosity. And sometimes they are persecuted for it.

Muslims and others of faith participated in the roundtable discussions and in the Public Forum. They talked about building bridges and understanding and dialogue for the sake of the arts and for the sake of better human understanding. That discussion did not compromise either their faith or the teachings of their faith. They brought a dignity and profundity to the Forum that I now regret not having mentioned in my article.

If you did not read my article, but merely scanned the headline and the subheadings (all provided incidently by the editor of this journal - although I have no criticism with those chosen) then why attack the article and the Forum and make allegations that are clearly unfounded?

That position seems as absurd as banning a film that no one has seen.

But Peace be with you too. And I pray that no one ever violates your Human Rights - it would then be my duty and my privilege to defend those rights.

Best wishes,

posted by benjamin [benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au](mailto:benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au)

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### make art not borders

Wed, Jun 21 2006 00:58:33

hello..

I've read the article and few other comments. I've missed the workshop because I wasn't here (in m'sia). It was a good attempt for the organiser to organise such talk & workshop. I have organizing few "alternative & independent "art events and workshop and face the same problems with the "authority (people who have the power to control) and few public". in my own view I see the [authority] also as the public.. I do agree that it is not easy to approuce the "public" or to explain to the "public" what we the "artist" is trying to do. I see myself as a public...but I understand what we are facing and discussing about, because I work in this field...but what about others?

My suggestion is that in the future, we-[who ever will be organizing] should (if its possible) to invite not only art practitioners, writers, activists, filmmakers and academics from around the region, as the speaker but also the "public" that we are discussing with or people who control the system that we live in not only as an audience but as a speaker in a talk/discussion. mainstream media (beside kakiseni/ art magazine) play a major part in getting our idea/issues/conflicts etc to the public, so why not use it. Don't just used media as a promotion /advert /announcement... Not all public goes to art discussion/ art galleries/ art opening exhibitions/ surf and browse kakiseni ... but majority of the public reads local newspaper.

It's just a suggestion...  
culture and arts define a country..true..and sad...

all the best!

posted by 'we'still hate borders [lilu\\_numlock@hotmail.com](mailto:lilu_numlock@hotmail.com)

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**Ideology Fizziology**

Thu, Jun 22 2006 13:05:41

Benjamin,

Yes, I agree it is problematic to comment on something (whether event or article) that one hasn't attended or read.

But I think you may be jumping the gun in saying that Hello's comment was an 'attack' on the forum, its contents, etc.

I see it more as an expression of dissatisfaction and frustration with the spaces that we do have to engage in dialogue about these issues.

That there are informed people out there who do NOT want to attend forums such as these is a reality we should discuss openly. Do we immediately label them as unengaged, or somehow less vested than 'we' are in creating a productive and open cultural society?

This forum was open to the public, and the discussion of it (in this forum) still is. But I think we should acknowledge the boundaries of its 'open-ness', and how some (many?) people seem to feel a lack of access (whether physical or ideological) to something that is deemed to be 'open'. If we say 'I invite you into my house' and someone says 'I don't want to come', we seem to take offense immediately, without listening to why not.

Hello, I hear your need for 'spiritual' food. I don't necessarily see it in terms of religiosity, as you have, Benjamin. 'Spiritual' (not the best word, I admit) here speaks of something a bit more open than ideology, a thing that cleaves to individual thought and action. We are all doing what we can. You don't have to be part of Food Not Bombs or Panic Buttons or anything else to still be involved, Hello.

posted by Betta Sim [betta@hotmail.com](mailto:betta@hotmail.com)

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**Ya Setuju!**

Thu, Jun 22 2006 13:20:19

I also totally agree : Make art, not borders!

posted by Betta Sim [betta@hotmail.com](mailto:betta@hotmail.com)

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**point taken**

Thu, Jun 22 2006 17:01:30

I take your point - and am pleased that this dialogue is at least still generating interest.

I also agree with you in regard to spirituality too and the breadth of its definitions - again another reason for making art and pulling down barriers.

posted by benjamin [benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au](mailto:benjamin.mckay@cdu.edu.au)

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**Betta's got it right**

Fri, Jun 23 2006 10:40:18

Yup, it is dissatisfaction and frustration.

And my rights and your rights mr.mckay are being stomped on everyday, by ruthless and unscrupolous countries and companies.

I say I have the right to peace, and it is my duty to live in peace, to be committed to peace. But tell me. do you truly care or are you activists just sowing false hopes. C'mon, show me you can stand up to capitalism, or whatever you people deem "evil" nowadays. Go ahead make my day. perhaps america or iraq is "evil".

Give me peace, just one day of peace. I may live in malaysia in "relative" peace, but the wars, poverty and other diseases the world faces festers within me, and I'm not willing to drink my worries away or drug myself to sleep, I am no snivelling coward, I'll stick around and figure out how to make things better. But I wont claim that I am a "defender of rights" or that I did anything at all, God works through men mr.mckay, what ever I do to make things better is God's work, I take no credit for the goodness that comes from me, but I take full blame for the rottenness that comes from me.

Perhaps I shall read your article after all, but mr.mckay do not tell me you are a defender of rights, for that is truly God's business alone. Peoples suffering and sorrow are not alleviated by your hand mr.mckay, or any man's hands. For hearts are beyond our reach.

But I sense you're a good man mr.mckay, its just that we have conflicting points of views, by all means save us, our rights are indeed denied to us.

posted by Hello [Yup@ok.com](mailto:Yup@ok.com)

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**Peace be with you**

Fri, Jun 23 2006 10:41:06

Peace be with you

posted by hello [Yup@ok.com](mailto:Yup@ok.com)

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**Making and moving the debate**

Fri, Jun 23 2006 20:09:11

A few weeks ago I organised a discussion in the living room of my small flat in Brickfields. I called it "cultural skirmishes" - rather grand perhaps, for a forum that was not air-conditioned, supplied no refreshments and was not a 'public affair'. There were ten of us by the end of the evening - nothing was resolved but we learnt about the misgivings and desires of each other; some "grand plans" were confronted with "reality checks"; and in some palpable way we constituted a 'community' - much talked about, but intermittently realised.

When I say "I" was the organiser, I mean that only in terms of a taking responsibility for the venue of the discussion. But in a more important sense, that evening's discussion was part of an on-going discussion I have been having with several individuals in a variety of contexts - some institutional, some more informal; often with the bonds of friendship and, dare I say "love" and "mutual attraction". And so my initiative feed off an already exiting network.

My point is simply, that we can all play - if we so desire - at becoming these nodal points (moments of coming together) and perhaps expand and disseminate our concerns.

Panic Buttons in KL, comes out of the convergence of several threads of debate and discussion, and also of organising these concerns.

I can't speak for the organisers - though I was one of them - but there was much lacking in the organisation of the public event. For that I apologise.

Having made that necessary gesture, I hope that both those who attended as well, probably more so, those who did not attend the forum, see the immense possibilities available to all of us in contributing to this debate about the very fabric of society.

posted by Sharaad Kuttan [sharaad@gmail.com](mailto:sharaad@gmail.com)

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### **beban mat salleh!**

Fri, Jun 23 2006 20:10:40

"...I look forward to seeing more critically informed public engagements throughout the region in the near future."  
Benjamin McKay

patronising gila!-nampak sangat tak boleh buang mentaliti kolonialis keturunan dia!

p/s:mr mckay, apsal lu bising kat sini, kenapa kat australia tu dah takde orang nak dengar buah fikiran kau ke?

posted by anti dumping! [bosan@bosan.bosan](mailto:bosan@bosan.bosan)

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### **patronising?**

Sat, Jun 24 2006 16:09:52

juz curious why wanting to see more events like Panic Buttons taking place in our region is patronising? i mean this guy is only reviewing something that we organised. wanting to see more events like this is hardly patronising or colonial. it is juz an observation. attacking the author because he is white is though very patronising and really stupid

posted by cecilia [cecqua@mac.com](mailto:cecqua@mac.com)

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### **Kathy Rowland**

Sat, Jun 24 2006 18:43:34

Kathy Rowland is frikkin' hot!

posted by KR is Hot [mahai@yourhai.com](mailto:mahai@yourhai.com)

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### **Dumbing Down**

Sun, Jun 25 2006 20:54:47

It was bound to happen. This rather opportunistic racialisation of the debate some of us are trying to foster is one of the main symptoms of the deep cultural stagnation we are suffering in Malaysia.

While there is really no need to dignify the writer with a direct response, I think we would gain much from trying to understand the existing social, cultural and political processes that lead to re-production of the mindset expressed in that comment.

This deserves a workshop of its own but to keep some of the ideas generated during the forum alive let me make a quick reference to the insights of Indonesian writer and thinker, Goenawan Mohamad.

One of the threads during the forum touched on the 'cultural problem' of nationalism and the idiom of race.

Goenawan spoke a little about the history of the Indonesian nationalist revolution and how Soekarno refused racialised rhetoric in his speeches against Dutch colonialist. And only in one instances did he stoop to racism and that was when provoked by a Dutch newspaper (if my memory serves me correctly). "Imperialism" was for him, and for a generation tutored in scientific Marxism, a class issue.

Goenawan's point, I believe, was that this history remains the foundations of a civic notion of nationhood in contemporary Indonesia - of Pancasila and the performance of the State enunciated ideal of "unity in diversity".

I mention this not to deny the question of "race" nor to valorise Marxism (with it own conceptual problems) but we need only to interrogate Malaysian history to see how a cultural logic based on race has thoroughly suffocated critical thinking locally. It has also pitted Malaysians against each other making the social fabric brittle and, more crucially, impacted the political economy of our "social contract" - weakening our ability to re-negotiate Malaysia's place the global economic order.

To return to the unfortunate who sought to defend 'his nation' against 'meddling foreigners':

What is the daily intellectual and cultural diet of such a Malaysian - how does he map the world; how is he taught to understand history; who is he told to fear, to tolerate, to be-freind but hold at bay, to emulate but despise; is he gripped with mythologies of the past, of origins; is his future an empty promise of consumerist consumption; what does

he love, who does he love; who are his role models; is 'political polemic' his idea of intellectual debate; and what would draw him into a genuine dialogue with 'others' in his society?

His portrait is an urgent one to paint, understand and engage. At the same time he cannot be the centre of our concerns because his position is constructed by a pedestrian negativity, that is, his desire to dumb down our dialogue.

And we must resist this agenda.

To resist this dumbing down adequately we need (1) to find a new vocabulary to represent our realities and concerns - for example, to re-fashion a tradition of rights-based discourse regarding 'minority rights'; (2) to speak with a kind radical earnestness, to seek interlocutors, partners in sustained dialogue; and (3) to treat as symptomatic rather than to take at face-value (and thus respond emotionally to) comments that seek to 'dumb down' the debate.

I, for one am happy that Benjamin McKay cares enough about "our local" to contribute his thoughts. Perhaps we can ask Benjamin to share something of the cultural skirmishes existing in "his local". It could, perhaps, be very exciting and productive exchange.

posted by Sharaad Kuttan [sharaad@gmail.com](mailto:sharaad@gmail.com)

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### **Bravery and Valor**

Mon, Jun 26 2006 09:48:07

Ah, finally someone steps up to take at least partial blame for the lack of "advertising" for the event, heh, its a powerful weapon ya'know, and the "scourge" of mankind knows it.

It would have been so much better if all the people on the left and right opened their minds a bit, its us in the middle who are more willing to accept notions put for by the democrats and communists and anarchists. The majority or the minority, the powerful or the weak. The religious or the secular.

Because you see to be a real scholar, it requires you to not take sides, knowledge is the property of the poor. Poverty is the path to knowledge. YOU know what they call it, they call it critical thinking.

Try it out for once. e.g. The renaissance wasnt all good for europe, though they seem to think so, well most of them at least, cept for the church. Look carefully at the roots of the politics of this world and at the reality of mankind, when so many theories, ideologies and beliefs are finally unravelling, what do you do, do you blindly subscribe to any of the ailing paths, do you correct the old ways or do you make new ones like the bahai. So many historical events not taken into consideration. More often than not its the ancient history that not being critically studied enough.

Current history blinds us to the truth, though itself carries portions of it. Yet nobody is willing to study before debate which produces limited views and limited minds. Pursue all avenues of enlightenment, then talk, and talk well and be sure you heard, then truly talk is action.

posted by Hello [Yup@ok.com](mailto:Yup@ok.com)

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### **Rats in a cage**

Mon, Jun 26 2006 13:07:10

Sharaad,

When you speak of this 'unfortunate who sought to defend 'his nation' against 'meddling foreigners', you talk as if you are pointing to a social specimen which must be dissected, each part taken out and labelled neatly.

'HIS portrait is an urgent one to paint', 'HIS position is one of pedestrian negativity', HIS desire to dumb down OUR dialogue'.

Oh excuse me, I was under the impression this 'dialogue' belongs to everyone, but it is actually OUR dialogue. Ok, salahfaham. My bad.

And so, instead of engaging this 'unfortunate hyper-racialized Malaysian', you instead USE 'him' (sic) as a subject in your debates! Your social probing only seeks to produce a portrait of a 'savage' - why then confuse this endeavour with open, muhibah sounding action terms like 'dialogue'?

Feels like you're drawing pretty damn near to good ol' colonialist methods of representing the 'other'.

Make as much new vocabulary as you want, as long as it is in the same language (english, activist, jargonistic, cultural theoretic, primarily textual), it will play the same discursive, hegemonic role, within the same limits.

I appreciate panic buttons for what it is. I just don't think it should be seen or called what it isn't.

The dialogue in Panic Buttons was valid, informative and very useful (I was there). But for all the ideas and theoretical complexity - it isn't a bridge.

To me a bridge is something as simple as learning Mandarin, or writing more in Bahasa.

Make art, not borders.

posted by Betta [betta@hotmail.com](mailto:betta@hotmail.com)

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### **Racism-Straying from the point**

Mon, Jun 26 2006 18:27:13

Wow, I was reading through the above comments, and I just couldn't believe someone could accuse another of being colonialist simply because they were not born in this country, happen to be white and were commenting on something to do with Malaysia.

Come on! We don't have to be Iraqi or American to make valid and justified comments on what's going on Iraq (I'm personally against the war), at least not if we're well-read/informed about what's going on there (tho who's to judge that is anybody's guess).

Personally, I wouldn't care who comments on my country, as long as what they say would help me to learn as a Malaysian to better my country, and vice versa.

It is so hypocritical and unwarranted to attack someone's comments on the basis of their race instead of the validity of the comments themselves. Unless the context of the person's race SOOOO impacts on their input on social, political and cultural affairs in a particular region (which I do not believe it should in this era of access to knowledge on different cultures, political climates and language), it is remarkably self-defeating to penalise someone for being born (through no choice of their own, may I point out) into a particular race/country.

Whoever does so penalise another is straying from the point, doing both that other party and themselves a disservice.

Tell me anything good, bad or ugly about my country; whether or not you're from here, I have a personal duty and right to weigh those comments which you have every right to make as a human being equal to me (although differentiated from me in terms of man-made geographical boundaries, and historical baggage), come to my own informed conclusions and address your comments in terms of merit and not the superficial respective colours of our skin. Definitely, if our situations were reversed, I would hope to receive the same treatment.

I would hate to think that if I were in another country trying to fight to eradicate poverty or medical ills or trying to point out what I see as an abuse of human rights (which are HUMAN issues, not at all choosing a particular race to manifest themselves in-every country seems to suffer from these matters), my contributions or efforts might be dismissed simply because of my race.

If ever there's been a time to put race aside and concentrate instead on finding solutions to life's universal maladies (with God's help and direction of course, Hello), I would think this is it. I wonder if my little lecture will generate both applause and criticism? Well, I guess that's the point of dialogue, and we all need some robust dialogue sometimes:)

Regards to all,  
Whitearrow

posted by Whitearrow [whitearrow\\_22@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:whitearrow_22@yahoo.co.uk)

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#### **CoudIn't resist...**

Tue, Jun 27 2006 03:44:44

"...(thus far) the right has dictated the culture wars and dominated the public imaging of art and academy, as the layman is led to associate the first with pornography, the second with indoctrination, and both with a waste of taxpayer money. Such are the deserts of the rightist campaign: while the left talked about the political importance of culture, the right practiced it. It philosophers have succeeded where readers of Marx have not – they have transformed the world, and it will take a great struggle to transform it otherwise."

-Well, could this analogy remotely apply to the issue raised here, or to our condition in Msia/SEAsia.

posted by Hal Foster Quoted [Return@Of.theReal](#)

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#### **khas buat bapak intelektual kelas atasan si sharaad kuttan**

Tue, Jun 27 2006 20:41:25

bosan!  
seribu satu pesan  
sepuluh juta jalan panduan  
namun tanpa satu pun  
titik penyelesaian  
aku, kelu, kaku  
membatu  
menerima beribu-ribu pesanan  
yang langsung tak mampu membawa  
baik satupun kesudahan  
hidup tanpa arah tujuan  
hari-hari masih tidak keruan  
sendiri tak berteman  
tiada yang mahu  
berkenalan  
berkawan  
bosan!  
aku sudah buntu  
perkataan  
hantar saja aku ke bulan  
aku mahu ketemu  
Tuhan

budak bodo tepi kaki lima jalan 2006

NOTA KAKI-Pramoedy Ananta Toer pernah satu ketika dahulu berhujah bahawasanya, malaysia ini tidak lebih daripada sebuah projek kolonialis barat-kita ini katanya lagi, bukan sebenar-benarnya merdeka, tidak seperti Indonesia. aku kurang setuju sebenarnya, malah sedikit marah, tetapi membaca respon kau sharaad kuttan, ironik sekali, dengan seribu malu, pandangan individualis almarhum nampak sekali kebenarannya!

posted by budak bodo tepi kaki lima jalan [bosan@bosan.bosan](mailto:bosan@bosan.bosan)

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### **The Malaysian Geist**

Wed, Jun 28 2006 05:33:46

tan tan tut  
keladi we we  
siapa kentut

...

biar dia komen dan berpolemik,  
tak tentu arah,  
semata-mata untuk mengisi masa lapang,  
hujah tanpa isi selain ad hominem,  
mungkin untuk lepas geram, syiok sendiri,  
mana tahu,  
tapi semuanya,  
menjadi petanda  
kedangkalan budaya kita.

I borrow Rustam Sani's use of the concept of "kedangkalan budaya" or "the lack of cultural depth" from his provocative 1992 essay "Melayu Baru: Bebarapa Persoalan Socio-budaya". While Rustam seems concerned primarily with the effects of modernity, as historically configured, on the "Malay" community, I think these thoughts can, usefully, be extrapolated to a properly "Malaysian" experience.

posted by Sharaad Kuttan [sharaad@gmail.com](mailto:sharaad@gmail.com)

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### **Lack of cultural depth?!**

Fri, Jun 30 2006 12:07:43

What on earth are you talking about mr.sharaad?! HAHahahah..

"Intellectuals" assume too much.

I'm all for Gandhi! Duty over Rights! Read up the history of human rights, Gandhi didnt vote for it, wisdom filled as he was. Why should I? BUT im more that willing to perform my duties, to be committed to peace and helping my brothers and sisters.

Those colonials we speak off set up the "human rights" code without our consent and when they went to Gandhi in hopes of his approval he critisized them and guess what? Those so called human rights people couldnt take a hit so they critisized him back instead of going over the human rights thing like civilized grown ups. Heck maybe they didnt even want to, back then all us "colonies" just got independence, maybe this whole human rights thing is to keep us in check..

I hate wat the colonials did to us, our self-image and self-esteem that is.. But I wont call mr.McKay or mr. Sharaad "colonialist" scumbags, heck that was the past, any white man today shouldnt have to pay for what his ancestor did BUT I do say that both mr.Mckay and mr.Sharaad have been fed too much "west" and too little "east"

posted by hello [yup@ok.com](mailto:yup@ok.com)

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### **Courage of their Conviction**

Wed, Jul 05 2006 14:48:12

Just wondering when the many people who contribute their thoughts and criticisms ANONYMOUSLY will have the courage of their conviction and use their real names. Wonder what fears - and desires - drive them to hide behind pseudonyms. Come out, come out, where ever you are.

posted by Sharaad Kuttan [sharaad@gmail.com](mailto:sharaad@gmail.com)

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### **confession**

Sat, Jul 08 2006 01:03:20

ok. my name is not sharaad kuttan.

posted by not sharaad kuttan [notsharaadkutaanot@gmail.com](mailto:notsharaadkutaanot@gmail.com)

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