

ROH

Hypothetical Art

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In a diagram for a presentation on "sustainable biocomposite artworks" at Kyoto University in July 2023, Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi maps out a concept framework: Mycelium BioComposites → Biocomposite Artworks → Public Perception → Mycelium Biocomposite Value. It is a loop and a hypothesis, that art made from living, environmentally aware materials can change how we value those materials, and that, in turn, these materials allow more art to emerge. His quantitative research approach (questionnaires and interviews following a presentation of mycelium sculptures at the National Gallery in Jakarta) concluded that the material "is positively regarded as a medium for contemporary sculptural art due to its novelty, unique visual characteristics, interdisciplinary collaboration, and eco-friendliness."

That an artist would submit his practice to public review in this way is unusual. But this dimension of Garibaldi's work—its consciously social aspect, its willingness to be tested, dissected and interrogated for its use-purpose—is what marks its conceit. Like a scientific discovery, his artworks must be held up for inspection, measured against the claims they make, answerable to the world they enter. Though Garibaldi's background as an agronomist and environmental scientist is often quoted as an explanation for his interest in biological material, we might pay closer attention to it as an account of method.

The materials he sources for *Lesap* are products of years-long collaborations, conferences, research groups, and grassroots organising, processes that echo the collaborative networks he recreates in the exhibition space

through materials like fungi and algae. Two prominent examples: Garibaldi is co-founder of Lokus Foundation, a non-profit that develops exhibitions, workshops, expeditions, and conferences at the intersection of art, science, and technology; and he participates regularly in environmental policy work, approaching these issues from what he describes as "a broader perspective," alert to how governmental decisions "profoundly affect future generations."

The exhibition begins with a series of sculptures rooted in Muara Gembong, a site Garibaldi has revisited since a first visit with colleagues through a community engagement program organised by the School of Environmental Science of Universitas Indonesia. Muara Gembong sits at the coastal frontier of northern Bekasi, and was once a thriving hub for shrimp and milkfish farming. The Basic Forestry Act of 1967 placed seventy percent of Indonesia's land under state control, handing its coastal forests to Perhutani, the government forestry enterprise. Land expropriation followed, fish ponds expanded unchecked, and the mangroves that had held the coastline in place were cleared. By the early 2000s, the shoreline had retreated by as much as several hundred meters in some villages, accompanied by a severe decline in mangrove cover. Garibaldi's first encounter with Muara Gembong was as a volunteer, building rainwater harvesting systems, public toilets, and solar-powered electricity alongside residents.

On a visit to Muara Gembong with Garibaldi, the coastline revealed itself in what remained: mangroves that had lost their grip on the receding shore, their forms bleached and supine. The sublime here, at this improbable edge where land meets the Java Sea, was inseparable from the wreckage. And yet the focus of our trip was not the damage but what had developed since, led by local residents who have sustained active mangrove replantation schemes, driven by knowledge held across generations of their ability to protect the coastline from sea water intrusion and erosion. Garibaldi pointed to one community group who have begun producing mangrove chips, mangrove dodol, mangrove juice, and mangrove syrup. "I think this spirit of resilience spreads and offers hope to anyone who feels connected to the area," Garibaldi says. "I try to apply that same spirit in my artistic practice."

In *Lesap*, the form of this spirit is best described as fantastic, taking this word for its original sense as something

strange, wild, extravagant. We first encounter his *Antara Muara* series, a sculpture that collages deposits of Muara Gembong's coastline, including mangrove driftwood and scallop shells. The sculpture is supported by a venous network of driftwood that hoists a shelled box upward, like an offering. It could read as a treehouse, or a shelter an animal built above ground by necessity, something designed to house something smaller than a human. It may come as a surprise to learn that the series' forms were inspired by the makeshift toilets local residents construct from mangrove driftwood covered in cloth, cantilevered over the river that bisects the residential area. That surprise is instructive, because what Garibaldi finds in these structures is an example of the interconnected relationship between humans and mangroves, how one depends on the other.

The room that follows extends this logic into a total environment of sporadic thinking. Deriving from the Greek *sporadikos*, scattered, sporadic describes a distribution of activity that is irregular, occurring in isolated outbursts. It shares this origin with the spore, a propagule released to find new life elsewhere, which recurs throughout Garibaldi's practice and offers a framework for understanding how his material sources inspire the logic of their painted and sculptural forms.

At the center of the room stands a brown, gelatinous chamber whose walls are composed of a biofilm produced from mountain and river water (drawn from the Citarum River to Muara Gembong) combined with algae and spores that introduce a dispersion of mould across its surface. Light illuminates the chamber from within, making visible the movement of live materials as they react to their surroundings and feel for possible space, producing organic paintings. Heat, applied in the studio, accelerates a process that exists everywhere at a pace that ordinarily falls below our threshold of perception, and most abundantly in the tropical ecologies from which his works draw. Here, Garibaldi allows this process to thrive monumentally, inviting audiences to be overtaken by works that grow, live, and breathe.

This material was developed in collaboration with Mycotech, an Indonesian biomaterial company that transforms agricultural waste into industrial raw material for use in fashion, architecture, and design. Garibaldi has worked with them consistently, pushing their materials beyond conventional applications in

consumer products toward uses the market had not imagined. The chamber is a reinterpretation of their product Mylea Sea, a seaweed-based leather, except that rather than controlling its conditions, Garibaldi allows its sporic base materials to thrive for a period of time, demonstrating their potential for patternwork.

Fungi, as recurring agents in his practice for over ten years, are cast in roles they already play in the world outside the gallery: as decomposers, transformers, organisms that move through soil and water and the bodies of dead things, breaking one form of life down so that another becomes possible. In a companion installation, columns of mycelium leather hang through the central section of the gallery, their forms scaled up from mycelium's microscopic spinal structures into skeletal pendulums. The exhibition itself might be understood as a body, held together by fungi, as all living things are. Extending outward from this center, his final gesture in the exhibition is its most open.

A participatory mural wraps the walls, the gallery's imagined disintegration, and the exhibition's most explicit statement on the temporality that ecological art inhabits: past, present, and future held within a single image. Water, mould and organic transformation are rendered by the accumulated marks of many people working within a shared imaginative frame. "It asks people to imagine what might happen if our surroundings were submerged by water, invaded by mould that grows sporadically," Garibaldi says.

And so, to return to his practice as hypothesis, these are the forms of a practice that advances in uncertainty, collaboration, and sporadic instances. To survive in capitalist ruins, Anna Tsing writes, we need collaborative practices. Unlike artists who invent and treat those inventions as property, Garibaldi shares his research in public forums, publishes through academic channels, and advocates for the wider use of what he has developed. Knowledge in his model is not a competitive advantage but a commons, tended collectively and returned to the world that generated it. An exercise in thinking together with that which we depend upon, and which depends on us. A hypothesis cannot be held alone.

"Through art, we can imagine ten years, one hundred years, or even further into both the future and the past. The same applies to ecology and the environment: what we see today is the result of hundreds or millions of years of process,

while the data we have now becomes the basis for imagining what may happen years from now." The mural holds speculative future, present condition, and historical fact simultaneously, because for many Indonesian coastal ecologies, the submergence it depicts is not imagination but documentation. The image of the sunken gallery sits at the intersection of what has been lost, what is being lost now, and what the available data suggests is coming.