

EMILY WAKELING



# *Learning from the Future: Tintin Wulia's '1001 Martian Homes'*

Tintin Wulia's contribution to this year's Indonesia National Pavilion at the 57th *Venice Biennale* looked like it was inspired by science-fiction. A large, glowing, transparent oval-shaped construction titled *Not Alone* (2017) contained erratically pulsating lights. Projected onto the ceiling above was what appeared to be a mirroring image of the work on the floor and its surrounding viewers. To the side, a video, *1001 Martian Homes* (2017), set in the year 2165, incorporated monologues of people discussing their family secrets and histories in an era of colonisation on Mars. The third work, *Under the Sun* (2017), was a staircase with monitors embedded into the walls, in which the viewer looked at numerous eyes displayed on the many small and large circular video screens. Being 'watched' the audience could then, at the top of the stairs, peer through a small hole in the wall into a behind-the-scenes space on the other side. Thus the viewer was staring back at him/herself; from the peephole the viewer's curious eye was recorded via a camera and displayed back via a monitor. Leaving the installation, the viewer could determine from where the eyes on the monitors were sourced.

Under the new directorship of the Indonesian Agency for Creative Economy (*BEKRAF*) and curated by Agung Hujatnikajennong, the exhibition *1001 Martian Homes* was, in this longest-running of international art biennales, the first time a national pavilion has held an exhibition across two venues on opposite sides of the globe. The live video feed above *Not Alone* came from an identical exhibition installed in Senayan City shopping mall in Jakarta. Through live streaming, viewers in Venice and Jakarta were experiencing the same art exhibition in real time, but in very different locations. *1001 Martian Homes* is Wulia's highest-profile commission to date and considering how her practice has critiqued the unstable natures of globalisation and citizenship—including her own—she was far from an obvious representative for Indonesia's showcase presentation. Nevertheless, the exhibition presented a milestone in Wulia's career, culminating in even more developed renditions of her recurring themes and motifs.

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In the exhibition's catalogue, curator Hujatnikajennong introduces Tintin Wulia as a "post-1998 Reform artist."<sup>1</sup> She first became known as a film activist and director in the years immediately after the fall of President Suharto's oppressive regime in 1998. Over the subsequent two decades, her practice has progressed from short films, to video art, to interactive installation art, undertaking international study and residencies, with film screenings and exhibitions across four continents. Growing up with the challenge of being from an ethnic minority in Indonesia, Wulia and her family were subject to discrimination

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against “Chinese religion, beliefs and traditions”<sup>2</sup> including the Chinese language. Only Indonesian was spoken in the household, and in a recent interview she recalled that, “I didn’t know that the gathering that we had once a year at my grandma’s was actually Chinese New Year—no one called it that, it wasn’t called anything, because calling it a Chinese celebration would’ve made it [an] offence.”<sup>3</sup> In 1965, Wulia’s grandfather was one of the many thousands forcefully taken and likely killed by anti-communist campaigns often instigated by the military and government.<sup>4</sup> Because of the official silence surrounding these incidents in the decades that followed, families of the 1965 victims, like Wulia’s, suffered for multiple generations from severe social stigma and discrimination.

In the 1990s, Wulia had her first chance to study abroad, through a degree in film scoring in Boston, USA. She returned to Indonesia in 1998, making music for a production company and starting her independent film projects, during which she watched the anger and uncertainty of the ‘May 1998 riots’ unfold across the country. Those events were the inspiration for her first film, *Violence Against Fruits* (2000), which shows in close-up a persimmon being chopped and eaten. A text explains that the fruit originates from China, despite the common assumption that it comes from Japan. A man and a woman also discuss the reasons people don’t eat dogs. The woman offers responses such as dogs being ‘man’s best friend’ and the man asserts it’s because dogs can fight back. According to the artist, “the feeling of being a victimised Chinese-Indonesian was prominent.”<sup>5</sup> The two elements—the persimmon and reasons for not eating dogs—combine to symbolise the vulnerability of the Chinese minority in Indonesia. This work and others, *Are You Close Enough* (2000) and *Everything’s Okay* (2003) were presented in Darwin at 24HR Art and Rotterdam at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art. In the following decade, her list of major international presentations grew to include *Istanbul Biennial* (2005), *Yokohama Triennale* (2005), *Jakarta Biennale* (2009), *Moscow Biennale* (2011), *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (2012), *Gwangju Biennale* (2012), *Sharjah Biennial* (2013) and *Jogja Biennale* (2013).

Wulia first began making short films as it provided the possibility to expand across mediums and, most importantly, she wished to make something critical: “Something ‘creative’ doesn’t always mean it’s critical—I’ve experienced how unfulfilling ‘creative’ could be. My art practice provokes me to be critical.”<sup>6</sup> Her practice is also driven by a desire to challenge expectations: “I spent so much time in my life resisting to be boxed. Around 2004 I was starting to be seen as a filmmaker and I deliberately challenged that by starting to make interactive installations.”<sup>7</sup>

With extended international travel, Wulia experienced considerable difficulties having an Indonesian passport. In 2012, she was stopped at German immigration despite having a valid permit to enter the Schengen area, the German Border police initially judging her visa and passport unsuitable. Eventually, with assistance from an official she gained entry but the experience left her thinking of and comparing the local and international difficulties she has had with her citizenship and the politics of borders.<sup>8</sup> Wulia’s experience of borders and citizenship aligns with global theorist Manfred Steger’s description of globalisation as a “messy and incomplete”<sup>9</sup> process, applied unevenly on top of more traditional nation-state systems, while leaving gaps and fault lines that can be difficult to negotiate. After her German border experience and in dealing with Indonesian bureaucracy over the course of her life, Wulia came to the understanding that national borders and citizenship are performed at an individual basis, via officials, and are alarmingly dependent on the individual, autonomous judgments and actions of these authorities.

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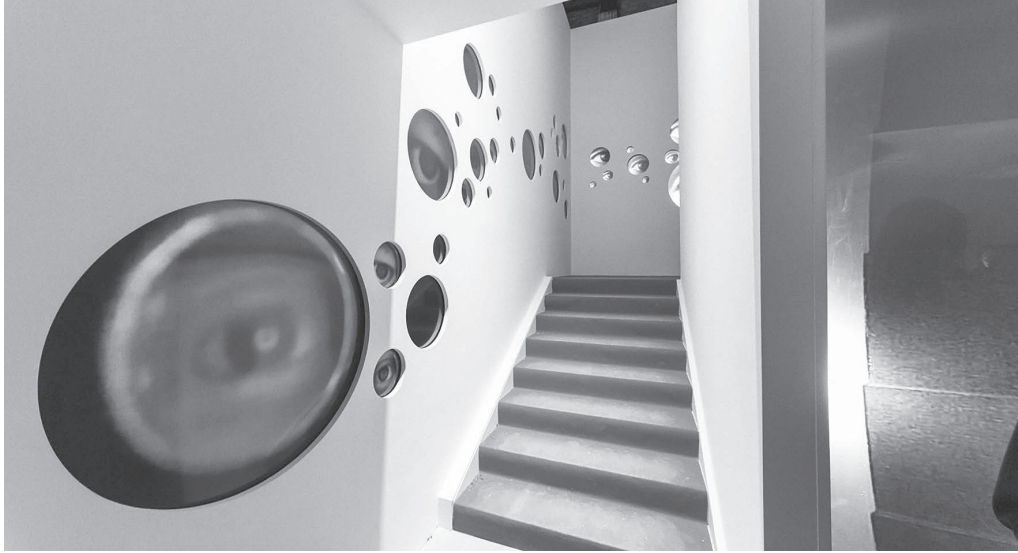
In a globalised world, people remain at the mercy of chance. In her practice-led research Doctorate in the School of Art at RMIT University in Melbourne undertaken between 2007 and 2013, Wulia used the term “aleatoric”—borrowed from experimental music—to describe a process that includes chance as well as the interpretation of that chance by the performer. As inspired by Steger’s words, her unpublished exegesis centralises the fact that she is a artist living and making art in the “unbalanced, unfinished” system of globalisation.<sup>10</sup> In her practice, it is the audience who become performers, responding to chance encounters with other members through the work. At the centre of her artwork from this period is a playful, deconstructive critique of geopolitical borders using three devices—walls, maps and passports. Wulia produced three key works (often on more than one occasion) based on the passport motif. Displayed as part of the 2012 *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, *Eeny Meeny Money Moe* (2012) was a set of four arcade-style claw machines. Instead of containing soft toys as their prizes, the machines held hundreds of small red, blue and black copies of passports from various First and Third World nations. In what was an enticing as well as frustrating experience, visitors could attempt to ‘win’ a passport by trying the controls. All the machines were connected to the active machine in the centre and mimicked its actions. This system represented, as described by curator Julie Ewington, the “innumerable replicated individual actions” that make up our mass societies today.<sup>11</sup>

*The Most International Artist in the Universe* (2011) is a stop-motion video in which the artist explains how she accumulated one hundred and forty passport while holding them like playing cards, before they move animatedly in a line across the floor. It is an exercise in considering her birthplace across time and in alternative time trajectories—for example, if she was born one hundred years before, she could have had a Dutch passport; if the Japanese had won the Second World War, she would have a Japanese passport; and so on. As the passports stretch across the screen on a mass-scale, discussing all the factors that could have altered her “inter-nationality”, the work challenges the resolute value of a passport, and therefore one’s national identity.

One of Wulia’s ongoing art projects is *(Re)Collection of Togetherness* (2007–) in which she uses her collection of fake passports in installations along the walls or floor of a gallery. Upon closer inspection, there are squashed mosquitoes inside the pages—mosquitoes being, of course, able to travel anywhere, carrying people’s blood in their bellies—and across borders. When British ships arrived on Australian shores in the eighteenth century, mosquitoes, lice and rats were common in the spread of foreign diseases. Health checks (especially after the bird flu epidemic and more recently Zika virus) are often included alongside passport inspections by immigration officials. In this sense, the presence of a squashed mosquito is symbolic of the “messy and incomplete” permission that a passport-carrier may still have to overcome in order to cross a border.

*Terra Incognita, Et Cetera* (2013), incorporating Wulia’s other driving motifs, of maps and walls, was produced for *Art Stage Singapore* and the *Sbarjah Biennial* in 2013. Explaining the ‘rules’ of her work Wulia indicated that everyone was encouraged to claim a piece of the artist’s world-map that she had drawn on a large wall. In a playful way, visitors could claim a territory simply by affixing a tiny cocktail umbrella to a part of the gridded map and writing one’s name.<sup>12</sup> In this act, *Terra Incognita, Et Cetera* is a deconstruction of the methods that governments and their players use to enforce their political borders, and draws attention to the important role of the individual when given a sense of power.

Beyond passports, walls and maps, many of Wulia’s works continue to exploit this “messy and incomplete” nature of globalisation. In 2011, when stopped at the German border, she was on her way to contribute a work titled *The Butterfly Generator* (2011) to the major exhibition *The Global Contemporary*:



*Art Worlds After 1989*, held at KZM Museum of Contemporary Art in Frankfurt. This art work's title makes reference to chaos theory's 'butterfly effect' which contends that small causes like the beating wings of a butterfly in Brazil can lead to larger effects, like a tornado in Texas. *The Butterfly Generator*, initiated in a German art museum and concluding in a gallery in Hong Kong, utilises products sold in a multinational furniture store found in both cities, and follows instructions given by the artist to 'hack' the products to produce an original art work.<sup>13</sup> As articulated in the exhibition catalogue, her work captures the contradictions of globalised art. On the one hand, globalisation allows for greater opportunities because of more locations, things and knowledge; it allows the artist to make an artwork that exists in two cities at the same time, made with the same items available in both countries. On the contrary, globalisation also means the loss of opportunities because of the process of standardisation that reaches as many people as possible.<sup>14</sup> From her Indonesian and Australian studios, this artwork makes the limitations of globalisation visible. Its reliance on a multinational chain store is its essential motivation, while the artist's instructions to modify the items are a way to playfully work within this system.

One of her other long-term projects, *Trade/Trace/Transit* (2014–), follows the material of cardboard in its varying movements and stages. This project took her to Hong Kong, to the robust, street-level trade that caters mostly to Philippine migrant workers' demand for the cheapest possible 'housing' material. Wulia draws on and paints this cardboard 'housing' in order to follow the material's journey through various trade points. These drawings then ended up at a cardboard recycling factory where they were pressed into large, heavy bundles bound with string; then displayed at *Art Basel Hong Kong* in 2016 and Osage Galley in Hong Kong, to be appreciated as artifacts of people's lives and as symbols of extraordinary inequity in our modern globalised migrant paths. Episode four of the project's video, *Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest* (2016) introduces a fictional future, told in past tense, of a family that travelled between Earth and Mars. In the video's context, the story is inspired by the migrant workers of Hong Kong's Central district.

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Reconsidering Wulia's *Venice Biennale* exhibition and in the context of her personal background, career path and past work, *1001 Martian Homes* has built upon her critical interests even further. *Under the Sun*, as well as slotting into the artist's ever-developing set of new media skills, is a work that conceptually connects Wulia's interest in art that operates upon individuals' chance responses. The eyes on the screens were a collection of ever-building, crowd-sourced footage as more and more visitors interacted with the work. As the exhibition had two sites, the work therefore had two sets of audiences contributing—a viewer's peering eye at the Venice Indonesia Pavilion would peer at a viewer in Senayan City—without ever showing one's passport. Similarly, *Not Alone* is at the mercy of visitors' contingent encounters and actions. It relied on visitors gathering close, both in Venice and Jakarta, to admire the work or satiate their curiosity. Resembling a glittering night sky or some extraterrestrial communication, it could have easily been assumed that the title referred to the big question, are we alone in the universe? It is only in close proximity that the live-streaming camera transmits the audiences' images back to Jakarta and vice-versa, to remind viewers they are indeed not alone. We are all a part of globalisation—within its potentials we are actors, and within its limitations we are subjects.

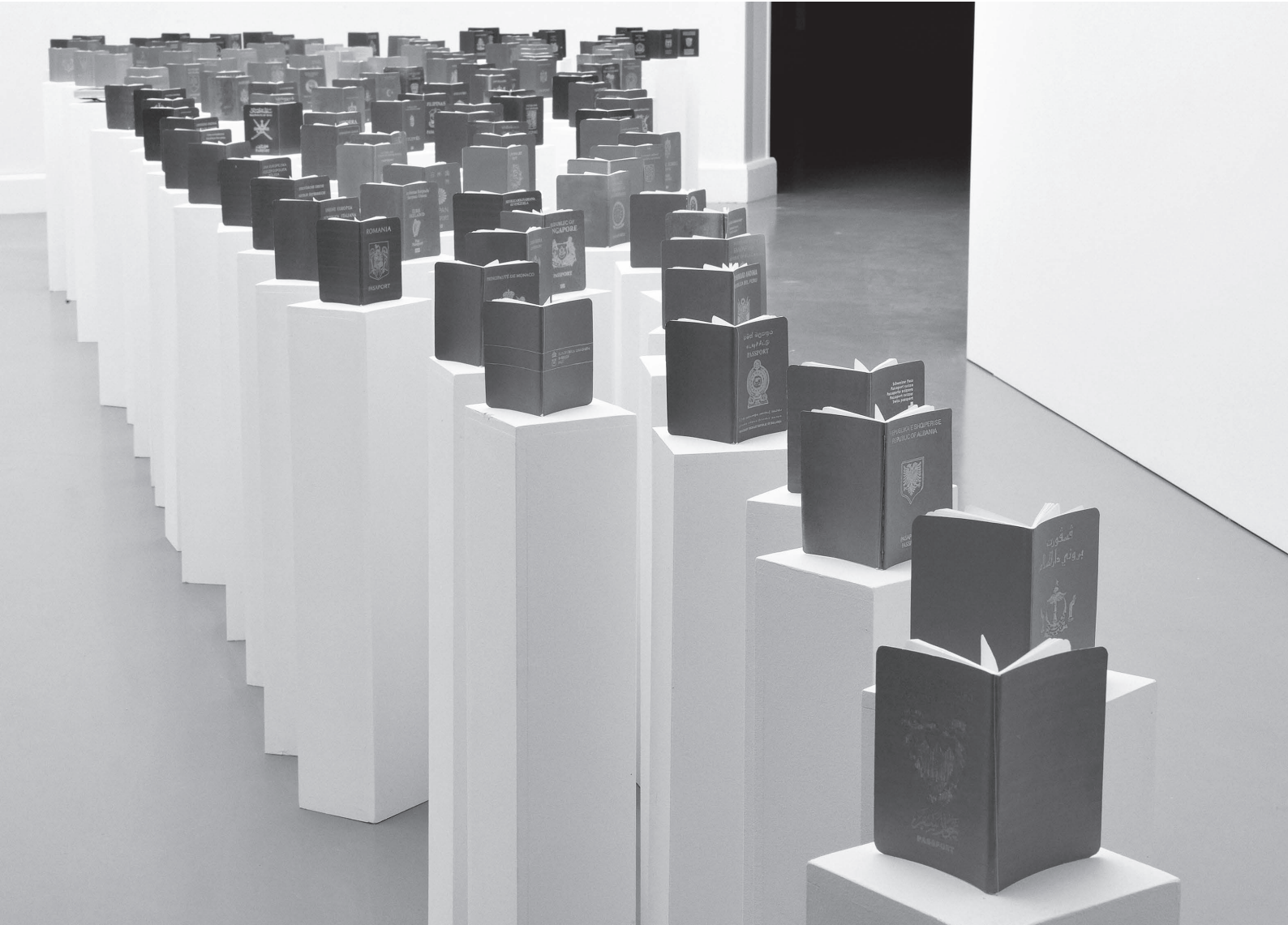
Additionally, *Not Alone* and *Under the Sun* could be a message for those who share inter-generational suffering from Indonesia's post-independence power struggles and under the Suharto regime. In her doctorate research, Wulia re-examined the personal shame she grew up with caused by the stigma attached to losing a grandparent in 1965. Wulia explains; "I was able to eventually reflect on the bigger picture by focusing on the border, i.e. the so-called coup as a military dispute between two sets of power over the whole nation-state. This allowed me to engage a wider public through the realisation that the experience was actually a communal one."<sup>15</sup> The works operate on a shared experience rather than a usually personal and reflective one, which demonstrates how connected all our experiences can be.

The video *1001 Martian Nights* speaks of the artist's past and present via a speculative future. The monologues are intimate and sad tales of survival in which people share memories of a time in which family members were forcefully removed, enslaved and jailed. Although set in a possible future in which humans colonise Mars, these are in fact Wulia's family histories from three or more generations ago. Mars is a conceptual substitute for the recent past from post-independence times as well as the migratory journeys her ancestors made between China and Bali:

*This story is in fact about my family: around the 1880s, my Balinese paternal great-grandparents went back and forth between southern China, decades before it became the People's Republic of China, and Bali, well before the formation of Indonesia as we know it today. They had two sets of children in each place, my grandfather and granduncle in Bali, and their siblings in southern China. Later I also discovered that my grandmother actually had half-siblings in southern China whom she never met. She described them once to me as "people with the same family name".<sup>16</sup>*

Indonesia chose a critical voice to represent it at the *Venice Biennale* and, thanks to the Internet, simultaneously inside Jakarta. In the exhibition catalogue the commissioning body BEKRAF expressed a rather incomplete understanding of Wulia's art: for them, it is about the way the "Internet and digital technology are constantly evolving and shaping our perceptions toward physical spaces and geographical boundaries," but her art is a great deal more subversive than this causative reading of technology. On the contrary, Wulia tends to utilise new media to be creatively critical of the kinds of issues traditionally off-limits in official Indonesian histories. Constructing artistic critiques about the oppression of the

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Chinese minorities allowed the artist to open up, first to friends and then to her art audiences, about her own family secret concerning her grandfather. Although discussion of—let alone an apology for—the killings of thousands of suspected communist supporters without trial is still forbidden by the Indonesian government,<sup>17</sup> Wulia has found ways to express her personal history amongst a larger picture of borders and globalisation. Although its appearance suggests science-fiction, her double-exhibition is very much about the past and present, one in which ethnic Chinese citizens often have their identity and movement across borders challenged and, sometimes violently, suppressed. Tintin Wulia's life has been subject to changing geopolitics and the chance decisions of others in power on an individual scale. Her art effectively communicated this experience to her Jakarta and Venice audiences in video, installation and interactions that were purposefully, conceptually—like globalism itself—messy and incomplete.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Agung Hujatnikajennong (ed.), *1001 Martian Homes*, Jakarta: BEKRAF, 2017, p. 1132

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislation\\_on\\_Chinese\\_Indonesians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislation_on_Chinese_Indonesians); accessed 2 December 2017

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the artist, 29 November 2017

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tinti Wulia, 'The Name Game', *Inside Indonesia*, 12 October 2008; <http://www.insideindonesia.org/the-name-game>

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the artist, op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The artist reflects on the experience in depth in her unpublished PhD exegesis: "This personal experience of the deportation is critical to my research project because it introduces four interrelated impetus to my research about the border... (1) the geopolitical border as the focus of my research, and its multitude of manifestations within the power relations of the nationstate, (2) challenges to the cosmopolitan utopia of the 'borderless' world and a shift of focus onto the dynamics of the border as part of the reality of globalisation, (3) the shaping of border dynamics by subjective sociopolitical actions coming from the individual actors, and (4) my own personal standpoint as a background to my research, in the context of the cosmopolitanism tendencies occurring in the contemporary art world along with contemporary globalisation processes." Tin Wulia, *Aleatoric Geopolitics: Art, Chance and Political Play on the Border*, Doctor of Philosophy unpublished exegesis, Melbourne: RMIT University, 2013, p. 30

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Steger, 'Political Ideologies and Social Imaginaries in the Global Age', *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric*, Vol. 2, 2009, p. 1

<sup>10</sup> Wulia, *Aleatoric Geopolitics: Art, Chance and Political Play on the Border*, p. 36

<sup>11</sup> Julie Ewington, 'Tintin Wulia: Crossing Borders', 7th *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, 2012, p. 214

<sup>12</sup> Viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SK5BrtD5Ai0>

<sup>13</sup> Viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXnrCdFvKxE>

<sup>14</sup> Jakob Birkin, 'Tintin Wulia', *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of the New Art Worlds*, Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg & Peter Weibel eds, Karlsruhe, Cambridge & London: ZKM | Centre for Art and Media & The MIT Press, 2013, p. 465

<sup>15</sup> Wulia, *Aleatoric Geopolitics: Art, Chance and Political Play on the Border*, p. 44

<sup>16</sup> Eva McGovern-Basa, 'Not Alone', *ArtAsiaPacific* No. 103, 2017, p. 112

<sup>17</sup> For example, Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Look of Silence*, about a man confronting the men who killed his brother as part of the 1965 anti-communist purge was banned by the Film Censorship Institute in 2014; <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/11/the-look-silence-breaks-censorship-with-free-download.html>