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Noise without Noise

Art interventions in a Southeast Asian city

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Published in:
Inter-Noise 2024

2024

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Groth, S. K., & Bubandt, N. (in press). Noise without Noise: Art interventions in a Southeast Asian city. In *Inter-Noise 2024: Proceedings of the 53rd International Congress and Exposition on Noise Control Engineering Nantes, France, 25-29 August 2024* (pp. 1-11)

Total number of authors:
2

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Noise without noise? Art interventions in a Southeast Asian city

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ABSTRACT

The experimental music community Jogja Noise Bombing based in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta has for more than a decade experimented with pop-up performances of harsh noise music played on DIY instruments in urban spaces. These urban spaces, however, tend themselves to be very “noisy”. Since 2018, we – a musicologist and an anthropologist - have followed these performances online and through fieldwork in Indonesia with an ongoing curiosity that stays with the trouble of noise. We are attracted to the context of these performances because they challenge us to answer a series of paradoxical questions. What is noise aesthetics in a place where everything is “noisy” and where this noisiness, furthermore, does not seem to be experienced as a problem or provocation? Can one even speak of “noise” if it is not unwanted? The social aesthetics of Indonesian harsh noise music in its specific attunement to the soundscapes of the Indonesian city challenges Western conventional ontologies of noise and ideas about the relationship between “objective” noise and aesthetic performances of noise in several ways.

1. INTRODUCTION

The DIY music collective *Jogja Noise Bombing* in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta is known in international electronic music circles for its so-called “noise-bombings”, pop-up performances of harsh noise music played on DIY instruments in public spaces around the city. These performances have since early 2010 been performed in the noisy streets of Yogyakarta, both during the annual *Jogja Noise Bombing* festival and as impromptu occasional performances.

Despite their international recognition within underground avantgarde music milieus, city ordinances regulating public order and soundscapes in Europe have meant that the Indonesian collective has not been able to organize similar “noise-bombings” in the Global North. European municipal misgivings about public pop-up performances of artistic noise contrast sharply with the ease with which organizers get to organize “noise-bombings” across cities in Java. European wariness about public noise bombings also contrasts with the way the Indonesian public reacts to them. Public performances of noise-bombings in Indonesia are either the object of mild curiosity or are studiously ignored by casual passers-by and figures of

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public authority alike in the performances we have attended. Rarely, if ever, do the performances provoke offense, objection, or attempts to shut them down. The noise-bombings, it seems, are not considered “noisy” at all. Why might that be?

This paper, in which we will try to answer this question, is a part of a larger research project called *Java-Futurism: Chronotopes of Sound Activism in Indonesia*, funded by the Swedish Research Council.³ The project studies trends in experimental music genres in Java such as electronic dance music and noise music through fieldwork, performance attendance, digital ethnography, and interviews with artists and producers. We gather these diverse methods within what we call an “aesthetic-anthropological” approach that combines the analytical aesthetic expertise of Sanne, who is a music historian and sound studies scholar, with the sensory and historical ethnography that Nils has developed as an anthropologist during fieldwork in Indonesia over thirty years. With a point of departure in this cross-disciplinary approach to the aesthetics and anthropology of the situated sound – aesthetic and otherwise – of noise bombings in Yogyakarta, the paper raises a discussion about the ontologies of noise as such by asking: What is the aesthetic and political appeal of noise music in a context where noise – in its broadest sense – is rarely considered disruptive?

We propose the need to “pluralize” the scientific understanding of noise along two axes: aesthetic-historical and political-historical. Indonesian noise music provides an instructive exemplar for this need to pluralize a universal notion of noise that informs both Western acoustic studies of noise and Western aesthetic studies of noise music. These two Western universalisms of noise and noise music were shaped by a common history. Noise music emerged from early twentieth century Euro-American aesthetic experiments and developed into a specific musical genre in the 1980s as a trend that highlighted the aesthetic qualities of noise and marked a rupture with common-sensical, acoustic perceptions of noise as “bad”, “unintentional”, “unwanted”, and even “unhealthy” [1]. This signaled in the context of Euro-American history an aesthetic pluralization of noise from being merely unwanted or bad into also being a potentially valorized aesthetic expression [2]. This pluralization disrupted the notion of noise with critical socio-aesthetic implications [3].

In this paper, we follow a second pluralization that dove-tails with the first: namely what happens when “noise music” emerges in Indonesia, where other socially embodied histories of hearing have sedimented into different ideas about what “noise” might be in the first place. In this context, we argue, neither noise nor noise music are what they are in Europe. The paper, in that sense, argues for a scientific pluralization of noise that is both aesthetically and anthropologically sensitive. It proposes an aesthetic-anthropological and comparative approach to capture the social, aesthetic, and historical plurality of noise.

2. NOISE BOMBING THE STREETS OF YOGYAKARTA

We start in the field, in Yogyakarta in 2020 at a noise bombing during the two-day Jogja Noise Bombing Festival, an annual event organized by the collective *Jogja Noise Bombing*. Noise bombings is a novel artistic format conceived by the founders of the collective. It takes inspiration from *graffiti bombings* in which Indonesian graffiti artists paint large, often provocative, political statements on public infrastructure during the night [4]. Noise bombings were meant to be acoustic equivalents of the graffiti bombings.

However, as we attended and listened the noise bombings in 2020, it struck us how few in the audience were provoked by them. It was not that the noise bombings were not striking or noteworthy, and they had all the ingredients to provoke an audience. The music was loud, distorted, and noisy. During their performances, the artists would roll on the ground, wrap themselves in chains, and drink from bottles of liquor, as they growled into their microphone and distorted the sounds coming from the loudspeaker on their portable synthesizers.

³ See <https://javafuturism.blogg.lu.se>

Inevitably, the noise bombings would quickly attract a crowd in the busy streets. Some onlookers were noise aficionados there to enjoy the show, while others were curious onlookers. Most people on the pavement, however, paid the concert little heed and would move on after giving the performances a passing glance.



Figure 1: Noise bombing performed outside the old post office in the center of Yogyakarta at the Jogja Noise Bombing festival in 2022. Photo: Sanne Krogh Groth

Indeed, the performances were struggling to compete with the traffic and general bustle of the street. Often, the surrounding bustle drowned out the noise of the musicians. In one telling instance, a noise artist in the noise bombing line-up began his noise music performance as large tourist busses roared by to take Indonesian tourists who had visited the popular Jalan Malioboro back to their rural towns. A minute or so into the performance, a pop band in a neighboring park began its sound check for an upcoming concert. In order to hear the noise concert, the audience began to lean in and close its circle around the artist. To get an indicator of the level of sound, we did decibel readings of the two competing sound events.



Figure 2 & 3 Decibel measurements during the pop-music soundcheck and the noise bombing. Photo: Sanne Krogh Groth

The noise concert was definitely loud. Our mobile phone decibel app meters showed an average reading of 81 decibel (being equivalent of a vacuum cleaner or car traffic). Even at a distance, in the adjacent park, however, the pop concert rehearsal was noticeably and objectively louder with an average reading of 87 decibel (equivalent of a lawn mower at full volume or music in your headphones). On any given day, traffic in Indonesian cities is equally noisy. A recent study from the Javanese city of Malang shows average noise levels of 84 dB in residential areas [5], far exceeding the maximum limits for noise in residential area of 55 dB set by the Indonesian ministry of the environment (Decree of the Minister of Environment No. 48 of 1996). Our own decibel readings in Yogyakarta have shown regular peaks in traffic noise of 110 dB (equivalent of a chain saw).

We are of course aware that there is only so much that decibel measurements like those above can tell you. But they do point to a socio-aesthetic fact: artistic performances of noise music performances in Indonesia are regularly and consistently drowned out by the surrounding amplified and mechanized sound of urban everyday life.

3. NOISE PLURALITIES IN INDONESIA

Decibel measurements can tell us some things. They can tell us, for instance, that by universal standards Indonesian urban soundscapes are extraordinarily loud. But they tell us little about how this loudness is aesthetically perceived, morally evaluated, and socially negotiated. Decibel readings measure objective fact but tell us little about lived realities. We need other methods for this. For over a decade, anthropological studies of sound in Java have highlighted that even though the noise in Indonesian cityscape is noticeable, annoying and even agonizing to Western anthropologists and visitors, noise – understood as unwanted sound – is a non-issue to most Indonesians [6, 7].

Indeed, it is hard to find a good translation of the English word “noise” to denote the aggregate of sounds that are unwanted or cause a disturbance.⁴ The word *bising* describes ringing or grating in one’s ear but is not negatively loaded in the same way that the English word “noise” is. *Ribut* may also mean “noisy”, and children can be told off for being *ribut*, but adults would never accuse other adults of being *ribut*. This is because the term *ribut* has different implications, depending on to whom the term applies. When applied to children, the term may indeed carry the meaning of being “obnoxiously noisy”. But the term *ribut* also means “storm”, so adults who are seen as *ribut* are not so much “noisy” as they are causing a social commotion or violent disruption. *Ribut*, in that sense, is a social disturbance rather than an auditory one. The negative aspects of the term relate less to the audible aspects of disturbance and much more to its social and moral aspects.

In fact, being loud carries predominantly positive connotations. The word *ramai* – another word that might loosely be translated as noise – describes the bustle of a celebration or social event. *Ramai* is the desired sounds of sociality. In Indonesia, *ramai* is a social good: it is the soundings of sociality and life, and Indonesian social life is generally characterized by what Sutton calls an “aesthetics of *ramai*” [6]. The anthropologist Karen Strassler describes *ramai* as a “key word of popular Javanese taste, [... meaning] lively, busy, colorful, and full of life” [8]. This social preference for loud, even distorted soundscapes often extends to aesthetic preferences as well. The anthropologist Anderson Sutton observed during fieldwork in Java that many of his interlocutors, given the choice, would position themselves between two concerts in order to hear both, rather than stay close to one and strain to hear only that. People, Sutton suggested, actually preferred amplified music to acoustic music, distorted to high fidelity, and noise to silence. [6] We observed that, too. People would crowd around

⁴ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “noise (n.),” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9743908767>.

loudspeakers at events, often with children on their shoulders, seemingly enjoying their ear-piercing output that peaked at over 120 decibels.



Figure 4: Spectators at a Javanese social event. Decibel measurements made on mobile phone app. Photo: Sanne Krogh Groth

This aesthetic and social preference for contexts that are *ramai* – bustling, busy, distorted, and loud – is motivated by the negative connotations that cling in Indonesia to silence. The Indonesian word for silence, *sunyi*, refers to solitude, to eeriness, and to loneliness. A place that is *sunyi* is bereft to social life and most likely haunted by spirits. If modern, middle-class Western notions of noise as disturbance are embedded in an existential ethos of privacy, a political ontology of rights, and a cultural aesthetic that valorizes silence, the Indonesian notion of *ramai* is embedded in an ethos of conviviality, a political ontology of consensus, and a cultural aesthetic that is suspicious of silence [9].

We propose this difference as a model for thinking about complementarities of listening rather than an argument about absolute cultural and political difference in how people hear. We hear sounds and noises with embodied affordances that are simultaneously physiological and habituated by cultural history. But habituated ways of hearing are never uncontested. Many Indonesians are troubled and annoyed by the loudness of their cities and their neighbors, and, as Alain Corbin has shown, silence has in European history been both valorized and feared [10]. Sound is always contested and simultaneously recruited into multiple ontologies in any given context. We propose instead the opposition between a hegemonic Indonesian aesthetics of *ramai* and a hegemonic Western aesthetics of silence as a thinking device, in order to challenge universalizing conceptions of sound, noise, and noise music.

The social hegemony of an aesthetic of *ramai* also translates into the politics and legality of sound and noise in Indonesia. Indonesia adopted national standards of noise pollution in the 1990s. The country was eager to shift away from an economy relying predominantly on oil and gas and promoted foreign investment in industry and manufacture [11]. As a result, noise standards were introduced in order to regulate industries. These industry standards have only in recent years slowly travelled into regulations of public soundscapes more generally. Even in those relatively rare instances where private Indonesians lodge a legal case against

noisemakers, the courts are reluctant to side with them. One study shows that 44% of the noise complaints about noise are won by the noisemakers [12].

The two heuristic aesthetics of noise that we have sketched for Europe and Indonesia, respectively, also mean that the histories of artistic noise interventions have different trajectories in the two places.

4. TWO HISTORIES OF NOISE MUSIC AND A PUZZLE

The musicians in the street performances of the Yogyakarta festival describe their music as "noise music". But what does noise music mean in this context? To answer this question, we need to trace the histories of noise music in Europe and Indonesia.

In Europe, noise music has its roots in early 20th century Futurism – in Luigi Russolo's futuristic instruments and his 1913 manifesto entitled *The Art of Noises* [13]. Both the instruments and the manifesto were celebrations of mechanic and industrial noise and a recuperation of sounds, marked and marginalized in European aesthetic as "merely noise", into the register of aesthetic appreciation. Gradually throughout the 20th century, noise as an aesthetic art form became an integrated element in several genres of experimental as well as in underground music in the Global North, eventually leading in the 1980s to the genre of noise music [14]. Western noise music was conceived as an explicit break with or annihilation of existing Western conventions of music and aesthetics [3], including the hegemonic idea that music was defined by parameters of harmony, tonality, timbre, rhythm and form, characterized by a temporal progression of melody, and based on musical notation. Indeed, noise music was literally a break with the idea of music as an abstract and autonomous aesthetics defined by an absence of what counted as noise [2, 15]. In that sense, noise music was in the West also a break with Western social conventions about sound more generally: with the social aesthetics of silence that devalued noise as unwanted and ugly [16].

In Indonesia, the genealogy of noise and music takes a different path. In Java in particular, conventions of refined cultural conventions of music, in gamelan for instance, were defined – not carried by a harmony, diatonic tonality, and metric rhythm – but by notions of polyharmony, microtonality, and polyrhythm [17]. The texture of refined court music in Java and Bali was characterized – not by a linear melody – but heterophonic texture. Music was passed on, not as abstractions through written musical notation and scores, but through embodied apprenticeship as part of everyday practice. Refined music in Indonesia, such as for instance gamelan, as our noise musicians would point out to us, "is already noise". Like everyday life, refined traditional Javanese music is in other words soaked in an aesthetics of *ramai* rather than an aesthetics of silence. If noise music in Europe was an artistic rupture with a political aesthetics of melody and silence, noise music was something different, aesthetically and politically.

Noise music in Indonesia emerged around the cultural and student epi-center of Yogyakarta in the heady and volatile years of the "reformasi" period that followed the fall of the authoritarian ruler Suharto in 1998. Many of the noise musicians that we have spoken to were engaged during the 1990s with punk, a genre closely identified with political student protests against authoritarian rule [18], but by the early 2000s they found that punk had become too "mainstream", after even school kids started organizing punk concerts. Noise music was a way of "identifying with freedom" [19], not just politically but also aesthetically, and as a result Indonesian noise music drew on and combined a wide variety of genres. Punk and heavy metal fused with noise music in the music the influential noise rock band Seek Six Sick, founded in 1999. Students at ISI Yogyakarta, the prestigious state-owned institute of art, which many student protesters against Suharto's New Order attended, found inspiration in the noise experiments with electronic music during the 1990s, where the collaboration between the rock group Black Ribbon and the cassette DJ Krisna Widhiatama's (later known as noise artist Sodadosa) with his circuit bent instruments is an example. Experiments with media arts from

the duo Electrocore formed by the founders of HONF Venzha Christ and Istasius, also included noisy expressions, and so did the Venzha and Jompet Kuswidananto's performances on bicycles. The bands Zoo and Senyawa's musical output also had elements of noise, while Indra Menus and his hardcore punk band To Die, formed in 1998, not only built a bridge between punk and noise music, but also became one of the founders of the Jogja Noise Bombing collective. Kenali Rangkai Pakai DIY synth workshops and orchestras, as well as and Andreas Siagian and Life Patch's experiments within art, science and technology are also of significance to the development [4].

What later goes under the umbrella term "noise music" in Indonesia, is an assembly of experiments in the creative DIY scene of newly democratizing Indonesia with a far more eclectic genealogy than that of Western noise music. Combining heavy metal, rock, punk, artistic experiments, media art, and political protest, noise music was a "street-level" phenomenon associated with political protest and a youth movement rather than a rarified artistic genre. It is an eclecticism that continues to be audible today with artists coming to the Jogja Noise Bombing Festivals from experimental jazz, grunge, heavy metal, punk, avantgarde, hip hop, and the DJ scene. But what distinguishes Indonesian noise music in particular is its relation to traditional Indonesian music. Many of our interlocutors in the Indonesian music scene tell us that gamelan, particularly in its village performances with their vivid overtones, microtonalities and frequencies, is also noise. Indeed, they find noise music in many traditional genres of music and seek to incorporate it in their own noise music.

Noise, so we have been told several times by Indonesian noise musicians, "is in our blood". Indeed, far from being a novel genre or an import from the West, Indonesian noise musicians describe another noise music history in Indonesia, one in which they see their noise music as experiments with a long history of noise music in Indonesian traditional music, from the refined Javanese court traditions of gamelan ensemble performances and wayang shadow theatre and Javanese village music traditions such as jathilan possession rituals and mystical nature poetry to other genres of traditional music across the Indonesian archipelago that they are now beginning to explore. For some noise musicians this reference to the "noise" of traditional Javanese and other genres is merely implicitly, but for a range of key artists on the Indonesian noise music scene – such as Raja Kirik, Lintang Raditya and Handoyo Purwuwijoyo – the reference is an explicit and deliberate part of their noise music experiments.

All these traces lead us to our puzzle: What are the aesthetics and politics of noise music in a place where it is not a counterpoint to silence, art music and Romantic aesthetics? When noise music – a music genre with a distorted, heterophonic texture – is a deliberate engagement with an aesthetic world of *ramai* that is already noisy, distorted, and heterophonic – can it then be considered a break? Against what does it protest? Is noise music even the same phenomenon in these two settings? Is noise?

5. EQUIVOCATING NOISE

We propose that neither noise nor noise music is the same in these two contexts. Indeed, if "noise" is not the same in Europe and Indonesia, and if the genealogies of music also differ, then how can noise music be the same? Scholars of noise pollution might object at this point: of course, noise is the same, no matter where and who you are. Scholars of music sociology and musical genres have also told us that noise music in Indonesia of course is merely a diffused version of the European and American genres of noise music.

We suggest another possibility, namely that noise – in its social and aesthetic forms – is always multiple. This possibility was already actualized in the European genealogy of noise that we traced earlier: when Italian avant-garde academics and noise musicians turned noise into a musical aesthetic form, they multiplied what "noise" could mean in Europe. Our Indonesian case of noise music multiplies noise yet again. The word we use might in all cases be noise, but how can we be sure they are versions of the same object?

Rather than assume that we are speaking about versions of the same phenomenon that can be compared, we suggest an analysis of these various forms of noise inspired by the anthropologist Vivieros de Castro's notion of equivocation [20]. To "equivocate" usually refers to something bad: to say one thing and mean another, but de Castro suggest "controlled equivocation" as a form of comparison that is less sure of itself. Comparison rests on the certainty that it knows what it compares, the similarities and differences between the phenomena – "noise music" for instance – that are to be compared. Equivocation is less certain. What if "noise music" in Europe and "noise music" in Indonesia are not synonyms (words that mean exactly or almost the same) but homonyms: words that sound the same but mean very different things, because they emerge out of very different historical worlds. Let us give an example of what we mean by "homonymic" equivocation, an example that is related to sound.

In his study of the Bosavi people of highland New Guinea, the ethno-musicologist Steven Feld initially thought that Bosavi songs about forest paths were ways in which they mapped their rain forest environment. Where Westerner had map, the Bosavi had songs to guide them. This would make maps and songs synonyms of sorts: different words that performed similar functions or meaning. But then Feld realized that all Bosavi songs are sung from the perspective of birds. Birds, he then realized, are for Bosavi people "not just birds", understood as members of specific biological species. Rather they are vocalizations of the ancestors. Birds are in the Bosavi language literally "gone reverberations". They are, as Feld puts it, "absences turned into presence, and a presence that always makes absence audible and visible. Birds are what humans become by achieving death" [21]. The Bosavi sing songs that see the rain forest as a bird would see it, if that bird was at the same time also a deceased ancestor [22]. In order to properly understand why Bosavi sing songs Feld had, in other words, to equivocate – to doubt, as it were – that he knew what bird was in the first place. He also had to equivocate about what "song" could be and about who was singing. Was it humans, birds, or ancestors? What the Bosavi call "gone reverberations" is not a synonym for what in English is called "birds"; rather it is a homonym: words from different universes of meaning altogether. Sound is always "acoustemological", as Feld's terms it: reverberations of particular and practical ways of knowing the world through stories and histories of listening and relations of being. Different stories and histories mean that what we in English might call a "sound" has to be equivocated: it might "say" one thing and mean another.

We suggest a similar need to be equivocal about "noise music" in Indonesia. Where comparison (represented on the left in Figure 5) feels sure it knows what "noise" and "music" ideally or essentially are, and therefore unproblematically can see Western music and noise on the one hand and Indonesian music and Indonesian noise on the other hand as versions of this ideal that are basically synonyms of each other and mean roughly the same thing, equivocation suggests that what looks and sounds the same – and which, as in the case of "noise music", may even be labelled with the same English term – may actually be homonyms: different ontological and acoustemological phenomena, in the same way that a bird in Bosavi can be both a biological species and an ancestral reverberation.

Equivocations of noise

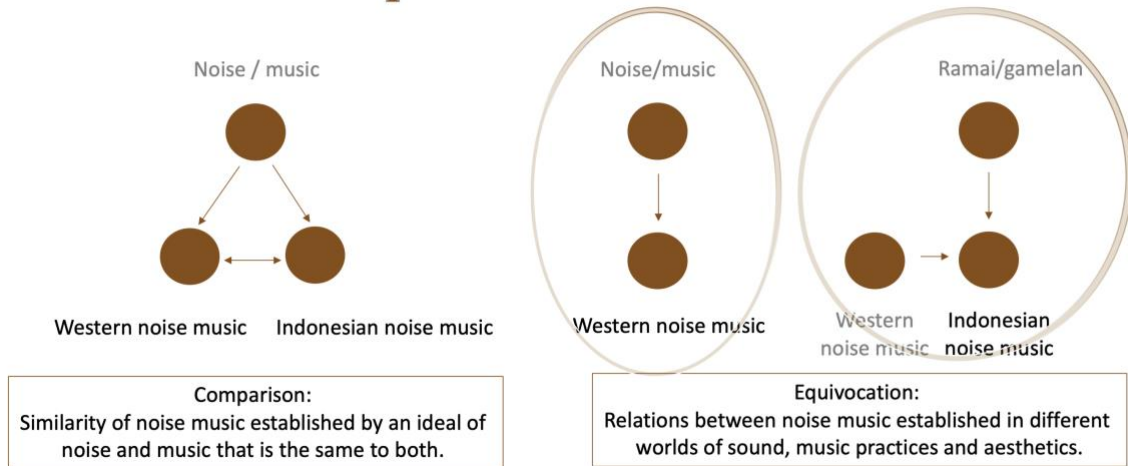


Figure 5: Diagram illustrating comparison (of synonyms) and equivocations (of homonyms) in noise music.

Equivocation holds out the possibility that noise and noise music that emerges out of different acoustemologies, might not be synonyms of each other (represented on the right in Figure 5). Noise music in Indonesia in an equivocal optic is not a version of a Western genre known by the same name, but an emergent part of a particular historical, political and aesthetic acoustemology. Where Western noise music emerge as a counterpoint to aesthetics of Western art music, Indonesian noise music is a sonic activism with different political and aesthetic concerns that grow not from the opposition between noise and music but from an aesthetic of *ramai*, which *bising* – the alternative term for noise music in Indonesia – engages. Western “noise music” and *bising* “noise music” in this analysis are homonyms: words that may sound the same but mean very different things, in the same way that “nail” may mean both an iron pen and the hard protein plate at the end of a finger.

From this perspective noise music in Indonesia destabilizes the Western genre of noise music and its claim to global aesthetic hegemony. It questions the universalist history of noise music by asking whether Javanese courtly music was *avant le avantgarde*, and whether Indonesian courtly music was, in fact, noise music from the very beginning. This means that the universalist history of noise music with its supposed start in European futurism is not the origin at all, but a provincial European detour [23].

Indonesian noise musicians propose this alternative history of noise music playfully as part of an aesthetic experiment. They are well aware that Javanese courtly music and arts were, as also described by John Pemberton [24], domesticated both by Dutch colonial presence and by New Order rule. Indonesian noise music is a critique of this domestication. Java for the Indonesian noise musicians is neither a place nor a specific culture – Java is an imaginary. It is an equivocation.

6. FINAL COMMENTS

This paper has traced the history of noise music in and beyond Indonesia in an attempt to “pluralize” academic notions of noise and noise music. We have argued that “noise music” in Indonesia is not a diffusion of, much less a synonym of, “noise music” in the West. Rather, “noise music” in the West and “noise music” in Indonesia are homonyms, terms that sound identical but have very different acoustemological meaning. The two are clearly historically related, but when aesthetic phenomena travel and are globalized, they are also aesthetically changed or

“transposed”, a process we explore elsewhere [25]. Aesthetic transposition and acoustemological embeddedness call, so we have argued, for equivocation in the analysis of aesthetic phenomena, whether they are from the so-called Global South or not. Equivocation as an analytical approach allows us to question the universalities often associated noise and noise music, whether they are introduced as standards or as musical genres. This approach enables an analysis that considers both the cultural and the ontological aspects. On a local scale, it redefines the aesthetics of noise music, while on a larger, global scale, it questions the very nature of noise.

Equivocation is not merely a way of destabilizing the notion of comparison in aesthetics and research on noise. It also opens up a space for different disciplinary perspectives in our collaboration across aesthetical analysis and anthropological analysis. As an anthropologist and a music historian, we often discuss the performances we have heard and witnessed together. Our perspectives are often so different that we wonder whether we have even witnessed the same event. Equivocation allows us to imagine that maybe we have not.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the artists of the Jogja Noise Bombing community for shares their arts, thought and noises with us. Fieldwork and research for this paper was generously supported by the Swedish Research Council.