MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE

Nafasan Bumi~ An Endless Harvest

16 JANUARY – 31 MAY 2026

Elia Nurvista
Bagus Pandega

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

↗ Elia Nurvista, *Plantation Tragedy*, storyboard. 2026. Illustrations and image courtesy of Arda Awigarda.

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, this book brings together essays and conversations that unpack the material and ecological concerns driving the practices of Indonesian artists Elia Nurvista and Bagus Pandega. It examines Indonesia's extractive economies, from plantations to mining, and how these shape both local realities and global futures. The publication situates their artworks within wider debates on material intelligence, exploring how substances such as nickel, mud and palm oil influence social and technological infrastructures. The book invites readers to reflect on what is harvested, what is lost and how materials might tell stories of survival and renewal.

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The cover encompasses both nickel and palm oil, which this exhibition focuses on. The wavy shape of the foil stamp depicts the smoke caused by pollution in nickel mining. A distorted version of Elia Nurvista's mural artwork part of the *Long Hanging Fruits* series, depicting an oil palm plantation, can be seen amid the fog.

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↖ Smelting of nickel, documentation by artist. Image courtesy of Bagus Pandega.

↗ **Charring of palm oil trunk sculpture by heat, documentation by artist. Image courtesy of Elia Nurvista.**

Introduction: a matter of knowing
by June Yap

> "I often wonder how people who come from elsewhere find their bearings in their new places. How do we come to see a place? How long does it take for one's eyes to get accustomed to the new light? All the old estates have many shrines to invisible forces from whom permission of trespass must be sought. Spirits of rocks and trees, and of the very land, the body of the place, that might reveal themselves in warts and bumps that push up through the ground."
> —Simryn Gill[1]

Extracted from the exhibition's title, *nafasan bumi* translates to "breath of the Earth," foregrounding the living nature of the terra firma upon which we find ourselves and thrive. Whilst this may appear cursorily anthropomorphic, the planet indeed breathes, observed via its seasonal cycles of carbon exchange. That the Earth is in this sense alive suggests we can meaningfully relate to it, and that in its necessity of breath, it is also worthy of empathy. This third edition of the *Material Intelligence* series confronts us with our lack of knowledge of the materials around us, particularly those obscured by chance, purposefully, systemically or simply in a failure to probe deeper into our conditions, perhaps shying from any threat to our habitual and comfortable ways of existence. We are grateful to Elia Nurvista and Bagus Pandega for their long-standing research and concerns that drive and result in these penetratingly insightful artworks, requiring us to step outside our familiar assumptions and frameworks to meditate upon two elements integral to contemporary living. Like thieves in the night, these elements have quietly infiltrated our lives and our beings; they are intimate and almost invisible, they are with and around us all the time. Indonesia, from which the artists hail, is the top global producer of both crude palm oil and nickel. This is not a statistic that we contemplate in the course of our everyday activities, yet they are part of our everyday experience. They are unfashionable and we are (for the most part) happily oblivious. As the quote from Simryn Gill's conversation with anthropologist Michael Taussig on palm oil plantations describes, there is much to learn within these familiar landscapes, as much as beneath their surface, if we are willing to look closely enough.

The fact that the artists have made great efforts to source details and connect threads of evidence should also concern us, as we assume we are in an information age; nevertheless, we may still be unconscious or misinformed. It is of some comfort though that the human pursuit of knowledge is relentless. Via discovery and analytical exercise, our curiosity for our world and universe compels us, including puzzling over the nature of intelligence itself, both as found within nature and of our own making. On the latter, machine intelligence and AI are ever more popular today, going so far as to impact the global stock market and economy via computer chips and cryptocurrency. That said, AI is not at all new, its public reception and evolution have been shaped by early image generators such as Google DeepDream launched in 2015 and, prior to that, chess engines like Deep Blue, IBM's Supercomputer that was famously pit against grandmaster Garry Kasparov in the mid-1990s, now since surpassed by the current highest-rated engine, Stockfish. It goes without saying that AI's trendiness has the art world swept up as well, resulting in both eager adoption and criticism, specifically over authorship, copyright, ethics and even identity (what does it mean to be an "AI artist"). That said, AI expansion poses considerable sustainability challenges, requiring massive resources of land, materials and energy to exist—an existence that we seem to desire in the form of everyday AI, now readily available and pocket-size within our mobile phones.

[1] Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, *Becoming Palm* (NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 21.

In our attempt to understand our world and our universe, we have traced our planet's history in geological time to a few billion years ago in the Archean Eon—significant for our present subject on the formation of materials such as nickel—with *homo sapiens* emerging only at a much later stage of around 315,000 years ago. To our credit (or otherwise), our impact on our planet has ushered in the age of the Anthropocene, demonstrating our active influence upon climate, biodiversity and environment. This has since been further refined by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing as the Plantationocene that expands the discussion of influence into the spheres of empire, resource, circulation and, uniquely, its "system of multispecies forced labour."[2] Crucial in our arrival at these planetary thresholds through human action is how we are arguably best placed in both the analysis of causal dependencies and the possibility of choice. Though one might say that choice is debatable, for we are also in a time of unprecedented accumulation of wealth by a few which control the material conditions and wellbeing of the many. Optimistically, it is a scenario that has potential for human connection and care; as Billie Eilish commented in relation to her own support of charities, "if you are a billionaire, why are you a billionaire?" urging those with the capacity to do so, to improve the lot of others.[3] What is intelligence for, if not to make a difference?

In 1972, philosopher Arne Næss proposed the term "deep ecology" to describe an "ecocentric" mindset, that he contrasted with "shallow" attempts which merely react to pollution issues and resource depletion, and are often focused on their detriment to developed countries. Instead, he urged going beyond mere fixes to stem the consequences of our actions and to adopt a "biospherical egalitarianism" grounded in a "deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life" in all its diversity.[4] Næss' concept is a call for a fundamental change in mindset and relationship to the world. One that is not driven by short-sighted greed or the race for power and profit, and thereby a shift from exploitative extraction.

As a series, *Material Intelligence* presupposes that new knowledge is possible through art. In the exhibitions that have preceded, Thai artist Korakrit Arunanondchai introduced the energetic and sonic communion of technology and spirits in A *Machine Boosting Energy into the Universe* (2022), and Singapore's Joo Choon Lin posited the crossing of boundaries between appearance and reality through fluidly shape-shifting materials in *Dance in the Destruction Dance* (2023). In this third edition, knowledge becomes aesthetic material. Indeed, in their substantive undertaking of research, it may be observed that Elia Nurvista and Bagus Pandega are by necessity and intent also historians, citizen journalists, even activists. Yet, in their attempts to materialise interconnections and speak truth to power, the efficacy of this aesthetic dramaturgy is if, recognising their own agency, audiences feel empowered and compelled to act.

Now that we know better, what would we do next?

[2] Mitman, Gregg. "Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, Moderated by Gregg Mitman." *Edge Effects Magazine*, accessed November 18, 2025, edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/.

[3] Larisha Paul, "Billie Eilish calls on Billionaires to support people in need: 'No hate, but give your money away,'" *Rolling Stone*, accessed November 7, 2025, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/billie-eilish-charity-donation-billionaire-call-out-1235456868/.

[4] Arne Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement, A Summary," *Inquiry* 16, no. 1–4 (2008): 95–100.

↖ Bagus Pandega, *L.O.O.P. (Loss Overgrown Organic Pulse)*. 2025. Photograph by Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.
An updated version of this artwork, *L.O.O.P (Less Organic Operation Procedure)* (2026), will be presented in this exhibition.

↗ Elia Nurvista, *Palm Reading* workshop. 2023. KfW stiftung. Photograph by Mathias Völzke.

Noticing in the Fog of the Endless Harvest

Syaheedah Iskandar

In 2013, parts of Southeast Asia experienced their worst haze pollution on record. Singapore's Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) soared past 400 for the first time, as smoke from forest and peatland fires in Sumatra drifted across the region. These fires, many of which were linked to slash-and-burn clearing for oil palm and pulpwood plantations, sparked a public exchange between Indonesian and Singaporean officials. During the incident, in response to complaints from Singapore and Malaysia, Indonesia disclosed that several implicated companies had ownership ties to investors from both countries. This revelation prompted Singapore to acknowledge and pledge to investigate any Singapore-linked firms involved.[1]

[1] Jaime Koh and Stephanie Ho, "Haze Pollution," *Singapore Infopedia* by National Library Singapore, last accessed November 28, 2025, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=0a5ea199-00be-4eda-b017-9cc0553c8819.

Amid this political volley, Bagus Pandega was in Singapore. It was the first time he encountered the haze not as something on the news or through secondhand accounts but as a lived experience. These fires occur primarily in Sumatra and Kalimantan on Borneo, and the haze that originates there is far less visible in Java where he resided. Carried by the transboundary Southwest Monsoon winds, the particles travelled north across the Straits of Malacca, carrying their consequences beyond Indonesia's borders while passing over much of the country's main island as they do so. The haze's link to the story of palm oil, the medium Elia Nurvista works with, is one we already know. The oil palm plant *(Elaeis guineensis)* is not native to Southeast Asia. It was introduced in the 19th century by the Dutch and British, brought from West Africa through colonial botanical routes to develop lucrative cash-crop plantations.[2] Since then, palm oil cultivation has reshaped vast terrains in Malaysia and Indonesia, becoming a familiar sight whether one is driving through these regions or viewing them from the air. In 2023, approximately 16.3 million hectares of land in Indonesia were covered by oil palm plantations alone.[3] Today, they make up the largest contributors to the global supply, with Indonesia first and Malaysia second.

As Brigitta Isabella argues in her contribution to this publication, both artists enact what she calls an "aesthetic reversal," a gesture that asks, "What, then, appears when art reverses commodities into their raw state?"[4] Rather than treating palm oil and nickel as purified, abstracted components of global industry, the artists return to their messier, more entangled forms, and to the contradictory realities that extraction tries to conceal, from the labour it depends on to the damage it leaves behind. Their practices take shape within a landscape made unstable by extraction and the irony of using these materials is also impossible to ignore. They critique extractive systems while working with the very substances those systems have shaped. Yet this paradox gives their works their urgency. It is through these contradictions that they reassemble the materials into configurations that open up different ways of relating to them. Through their artworks, the space becomes a site of potential history in the making, enabling us to imagine how these materials might continue to live on in the future, however uncertain that future may be. In these gestures of artmaking, they bring this large-scale opacity down to the level of lived experience, revealing how extraction shapes what we can see, what we are allowed to see and what is kept from view.

Making this "distance" visible matters for understanding how the artists encounter, imagine and represent the extractive processes. Indonesia, which spans more than 17,000 islands, is marked by such internal distances. Both Bagus and Elia live in Java, the country's cultural and political centre, but Java is not the primary site of

[2] The oil palm's arrival in Southeast Asia traces back to four seedlings brought to the Buitenzorg Botanical Gardens in Java (now Bogor) in 1848. Over the next four decades, European botanists conducted extensive trials to optimise soil, breeding and pollination to transform the plant into a profitable commodity. The first large-scale commercial plantation was finally established in 1911 in Deli, Sumatra, which became the model for Indonesia's vast monoculture estates. Seeds from this same Deli stock were later introduced into British Malaya, where the plantation industry expanded further. Jonathan E. Robins, *Oil Palm: A Global History* (UNC Press Books, 2021), 142–172.

[3] Reza Ariesca et al., "Land Swap Option for Sustainable Production of Oil Palm Plantations in Kalimantan, Indonesia," *Sustainability* 15, no.3 (2023): 2394.

[4] Brigitta Isabella's essay, "Aesthetic Reversal Against Irreversible Damage," in *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, ext cat. (Singapore Art Museum, 2026), 23.

extractive operations. While extraction does occur in Java, most industrial activities take place elsewhere in the archipelago, often in remote or tightly controlled zones that many Indonesians never see firsthand. This geography reveals how unevenly materials and their consequences are distributed: some peripheral zones bear the costs of deforestation, pollution and the strain placed on labouring bodies, while others remain proximate only through consumption. If the artists themselves rarely have access to these places, what does it say about our own positions as consumers from a neighbouring country? At a regional scale, Singapore's role as a transhipment hub adds to the opacity. Once materials enter global supply chains, few outside the industries know where they originate or how they are produced. Their movements become abstract from everyday view even as their material forms permeate daily life, from the food we eat to the devices we hold. As Brigitta pointed out in the artists' use of these materials, palm oil and nickel function as "super-natural raw materials… invisible and invincible, not because they are unseen, but because they are ubiquitous."[5] Their ubiquity produces a kind of sensory blindness: these materials become unnoticeable because they are everywhere, structuring regional atmospheric conditions, economies and infrastructures.

This large-scale opacity, involving the local, regional and global, functions much like the haze, a physical manifestation of how extractive economies trespass nation-state borders. These smoke-filled disturbances linger as reminders of what extraction conceals and what it refuses to let us forget. They also show how environmental events are never just natural, but are active in shaping how life is lived, and philosopher Achille Mbembe puts this into sharp perspective. He asks, "Is what is happening to us now at least in part the consequence of the work carried out for centuries to detach humanity from any connection with the whole expanse of the living world? Could it be that… history is being reduced before our very eyes to a play of biological forces, and the human race to the zoological and pathogenic dimension of its nature?"[6] Mbembe reminds us that the biological world is now writing history because we have destabilised it. Climate volatility, burning peatlands, toxic haze, diseases jumping from animals to humans, mutations of familiar viruses and intensifying heat all shape the conditions of daily life as forcefully as any political decision. The atmospheres and living systems we inhabit are no longer a backdrop to history but active participants in it. Thus, it can be said that the need to question the origins of the materials we use has never been more urgent. What does it mean to think materially from Southeast Asia, through the matters that have shaped our histories and will shape our futures? How might we begin to imagine the afterlives of these materials, if it is even possible?

If we are to think materially at all, we must first learn to notice. According to Anna Tsing, noticing is an attunement to the overlooked, the marginal and the more-than-human rhythms that hold worlds together.[7] It is a way of paying attention to what

[5] Brigitta Isabella's essay, "Aesthetic Reversal Against Irreversible Damage," in *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, ext cat. (Singapore Art Museum, 2026), 23.

[6] Achille Mbembe, "The Earthly Community," trans. Cila Walker. *e-flux Architecture*, accessed November 28, 2025, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/coloniality-infrastructure/410015/the-earthly-community. This article is an abbreviated version of a chapter that can also be found in Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia* (V2_Publishing, 2022), 121–125.

[7] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 17–25.

extraction forces into disappearance. In this sense, the artists' re-examination of materials shaped by extraction resists simplification. In the artwork *L.O.O.P (Less Organic Operation Procedure)* (2026) produced by Bagus, fragments of nickel ore move in a measured rhythm along a ten-metre-long green conveyor belt made of aluminium. Travelling to the end of the conveyor loop, the ore is dropped into a metal basin, producing a resonant strike that marks their completion of the circuit. Though mechanical, the machine's tempo is dictated not by machine or human, but by the tropical plants around it, whose biofeedback signals regulate its motion. Yet the system remains caught in its own contradictions, becoming, as Brigitta describes, "a simulation of the green transition that goes nowhere."[8] In this sense, *L.O.O.P* turns the idea of progress inside out. The machine keeps moving, but nothing actually changes. It exposes the illusion that extraction pushes us forward, showing instead how we remain locked into a cycle that advances technology at the expense of the very world it draws from.

↓ Bagus Pandega. Detail of *L.O.O.P. (Loss Overgrown Organic Pulse)*. 2025. Image courtesy of Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.

According to Bagus, his encounter with the 2013 haze in Singapore marked a decisive turn in his practice. It was the moment he began to "chase oxygen," a pursuit that would continue for years. This concern intensified during the early stages of COVID-19, when he decided to build his own DIY oxygen machines after hearing of severe shortages in Indonesian hospitals.[9] What had, for him, always seemed

[8] Brigitta Isabella's essay, "Aesthetic Reversal Against Irreversible Damage," in *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, ext cat. (Singapore Art Museum, 2026), 28.

[9] Bagus Pandega, conversation with the author, April 2025.

abundant and freely available suddenly became a scarce and unevenly distributed resource. Building on this realisation, Bagus expanded his exploration of oxygen, viewing it not just as a substance but as a relational element, incorporating plant biofeedback into many of his kinetic sculptures today. The plants' subtle bioelectrical signals activate or modulate the machines' tempo, enabling the artworks to breathe in their own way, sustained by the quiet labour of these living systems. Flora becomes an essential intermediary, allowing oxygen to function as both medium and collaborator. His turn to nickel continued this inquiry, expanding the field of oxygen from breath to metallurgy. Nickel, as a material, demands large amounts of oxygen, fossil fuels, electricity and water to refine, which contradicts its role in supposedly "sustainable" futures. However, Bagus has remarked that he does not oppose a future powered by electric vehicles. His concern lies with the extractive and processing methods, which have changed little since the 1960s, despite the technological advancements since then. For Bagus, the question is not only how these materials are produced but how they will continue to live, decay and burden the land long after their industrial usefulness. As the world's largest supplier of nickel, Indonesia faces a future in which waste from extraction and discarded batteries will accumulate faster than the creation of infrastructure needed to manage them.

↓ Nickel pellets in a container alongside unprocessed metal ore at the artist's studio in Bandung, captured during a studio visit in April 2025. Image courtesy of the author.

Loops of another kind surround Singapore Art Museum itself. Beyond the museum's walls, the Port of Singapore functions as a vast conveyor system, where materials and commodities move through the unceasing choreography of global circulation. The conveyor belt, shaped by the Industrial Age, was built to standardise time, discipline labour and accelerate the movement of matter from resources to commodities and into global supply chains. It remains one of the key infrastructures of modernisation. Against this larger choreography, Bagus's production line stands apart as a kind of

counter-production, a point Martin Germann highlights in his essay.[10] Rather than re-enacting Fordist principles of mass production and seamless motion, ***L.O.O.P*** suspends them. Its rhythm is reliant on the plants' biofeedback, so its pace is never fixed. The production line may hesitate, pause or falter. Instead of guaranteeing movement as a form of progress, ***L.O.O.P*** reveals how fragile and conditional progress has always been and, through these plants, demonstrates how deeply it relies on the Earth's ability to provide.

↓ Visiting a privately-owned oil palm plantation in Johor, South of Malaysia, during a field trip with the artist Elia Nurvista in August 2025. Image courtesy of the author.

It is also worth noting that Singapore's port played a central role in the history of palm oil. During the colonial period, Singapore functioned as a major assemblage point for plantation commodities, including palm oil. By the 1930s, palm oil produced in British Malaya was transported by tank wagon along the Federated Malay States Railways to Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, then moved to bulk storage at Keppel Harbour (now the Port of Singapore) before being shipped abroad.[11] Palm oil is often treated as emblematic of Southeast Asia, yet the plant itself is diasporic. Its proliferation is no accident. Oil palms are remarkably resilient, capable of growing in damaged or heavily altered environments, including places with depleted soil, high heat or land already cleared for industry. This resilience is part of the plant's unsettling allure for Elia, who

[10] Martin Germann's essay, "From Making to Shifting, thoughts on the work of Bagus Pandega" in *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, ext cat. (Singapore Art Museum, 2026), 38.

[11] A. W. King, "Plantation and Agriculture in Malaya, with Notes on the Trade of Singapore." *The Geographical Journal* 93, no. 2 (1939): 136–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/1787864.

sees in it a species that has flourished in transformed landscapes while becoming a symbol of "tropical beauty" and economic aspiration.[12] Indonesia celebrates itself as the world's largest palm oil producer in mainstream narratives, but activists highlight the environmental degradation and precarious labour that underpin this prosperity. According to Elia, Kalimantan has long been treated by the state as a resource frontier and is often the target of transmigration programmes that create tensions between newcomers from other islands and Indigenous communities.[13] As Anca Rujoiu notes in her essay,[14] drawing on Tsing's concept of "friction," this uneven terrain is where global capitalist agendas collide with local worlds, proving that these extractive economies do not expand smoothly but take shape through messy encounters. Part of Elia's family comes from Kalimantan. Her grandparents lived through the early boom years of forest clearing, their livelihoods intertwined with the influx of labour. Her grandfather's grocery shop served the workers who arrived during this period, and the family eventually moved to Jakarta as opportunities grew. This family history informs Elia's understanding of her own positioning within palm oil economies: she benefits from palm oil as a consumer and Indonesian citizen, while those living within plantation zones face precarious labour, degraded land and limited mobility. This tension between material prosperity and precarity underpins how she approaches palm oil in her work.

↓ Elia Nurvista. *Plantation Tragedy*, film still. 2026. Image courtesy of Wimo Ambala Dayang.

[12] Elia Nurvista, conversation with the author, Nov 2025.

[13] Cathy Harper and Elia Nurvista, "INTERVIEW: You are what you eat—Representing the politics and privilege of palm oil production and consumption," *Melbourne Asia Review*, accessed November 28, 2025, https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/interview-you-are-what-you-eat-representing-the-politics-and-privilege-of-palm-oil-production-and-consumption/.

[14] Anca Rujoiu's essay, "Elia Nurvista's *Long Hanging Fruits*: Reading Palm and Sharing Instant Noodles," in *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest*, ext cat. (Singapore Art Museum, 2026), 48.

Seen together, their practices move in a shifting relation between intimacy and distance. Elia's proximity emerges through family memory, while Bagus's arises from the environmental conditions such as haze and oxygen scarcity that have marked his lived experience. But the materials refuse to stay still; their histories move along many trajectories. Each material is itinerant and distant from Java. Both materials originate elsewhere: nickel is pulled from Sulawesi and Maluku into today's global energy futures, while palm oil—first transplanted across oceans to meet colonial visions of the tropical abundance—continues to drive today's plantation economies. The artworks not only expose the opacity of extraction at a macro scale but also redirect our attention to the micro level, where the system's unseen players—the labouring human and nonhuman bodies—come into focus. Where Bagus's works expose the illusion of smooth extractive systems and show how easily they can falter, Elia carries this question forward by imagining what happens when the materials themselves begin to speak back. In her film *Plantation Tragedy*, Elia constructs the oil palm plantation as a surreal dreamscape where trees, labourers, scientists and artificial intelligence confront one another in a shared state of exhaustion. Four figures—Francis the overseer, Dona the vegetal communicator, Watiman the scientist and Cyborg the sentient machine—voice conflicting desires for progress, justice and rest. The oil palms begin to groan, complain and ultimately refuse to produce, a fantasy of vegetal strike in action. As the trees "strike," the plantation becomes a scene of imagined resistance, inviting us to consider whether the Earth itself might one day refuse and retaliate. Yet the film's speculative fiction should not obscure its connection to the material realities and may also serve as a reflection of the climate events already unfolding around us.

Within the exhibition, *Plantation Tragedy* is set in a circular pavilion that evokes Renaissance architecture. Instead of marble columns, the space is anchored by sculptures from *Bodies in Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*. The Renaissance's aesthetic ideals—its perfected human forms and secular grandeur—have been understood by some scholars as contributing to Western colonial worldviews that placed the human at the centre and relegated land, plants and labour to the background. By housing the film within this pavilion, Elia alludes to this history while also unsettling it, positioning vegetal and labouring bodies within a space once reserved for imperial humanism. Across both *L.O.O.P* and *Plantation Tragedy*, agency emerges as collective rather than singular, distributed among humans, machines and plants, all caught in the machinery of extractivism yet still capable of disrupting it. Running through these works is a concern with labour, both human, nonhuman and more-than-human. They ask what it means for humans to labour under conditions of precarity, but also what it means to understand the vegetation as labouring? Perhaps it is to recognise the biological processes as forms of labour that extractive systems depend on and exploit. While *L.O.O.P* and *Plantation Tragedy* address the broader structures of extraction, *Gurat Lara (Scars)* and *Bodies in Penumbra* make visible the violence that these structures inflict on bodies.

In *Bodies in Penumbra*, two of the five sculptures depict human figures whose poses evoke classical sculpture, but their surfaces of palm oil wax appear to soften, crack and melt, undoing the authority of the "classical" body. These sculptures do not depict mythic heroes but plantation labourers: one carries a large bunch of oil palm fruit over his shoulder—a load weighing about seventy-six kilograms—while another shows two figures locked in a tussle, with one overpowering the other. Elia makes visible plantation workers whose bodies underpin the global palm oil economy, not as symbols of virtue or triumph, but as bodies strained, struck and often forgotten. Here, the ideals of the Renaissance seem to collapse under the heat of the tropics, returning us to the lived conditions of plantation labour. The title "Penumbra" derives from Latin and means "almost-shadow," describing the zone between full illumination and full

darkness. They echo what Mbembe identifies as the plantation's lingering "shadow," where life is kept productive but stripped of political presence, valued for labour yet denied full visibility.[15] While contemporary plantation workers are not enslaved, they remain shaped by the afterlives of this colonial logic, which deems them necessary for global industry while constantly exposing them to harm, fatigue and erasure.

↑ Work in progress image of one of the sculptures of *Bodies of Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*. 2026. Image courtesy of the artist.

↑ Work in progress image of *Gurat Lara (Scars)* with a 3D-printed model of Bagja's face. 2026. Image courtesy of the artist.

Similarly, insisting on the presence of those rendered indistinct by extraction manifests in Bagus' *Gurat Lara*, which points to another contemporary frontier shaped by the same extractive lineage arising from colonial logic. In the nickel mines of Sulawesi and Central Halmahera in North Maluku, extraction follows patterns not unlike those under colonialism and treats peripheral regions as resource zones and workers as expendable. Workers exist in a kind of partial shadow within these production cycles and are continually exposed to injury, toxicity and socioeconomic disparity. Indonesia remains the world's largest supplier of nickel, a position that carries immense ecological cost: deforestation, polluted waterways, acidified soils and irreversible shifts in local ecologies. Both artists remind us that human bodies are not exempt from these extractive harms. In *Gurat Lara*, a copper-coated sculpture of a human head is submerged in a tank of electrolyte solution, where layers of nickel gradually accumulate across its face through an electrochemical process. A live feed of this process appears on screens placed around *L.O.O.P* In the inverted video image,

[15] In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe identifies the plantation as an early laboratory of modern biopolitical control. The enslaved person is described as a "figure of a shadow," produced through a triple loss: loss of home, loss of rights over the body, and loss of political personhood; a state of being kept alive for labour while reduced to "death-in-life." They occupy what Mbembe calls the plantation's "shadow zones": spaces where life is instrumentalised for production yet remains exposed to harm, vulnerability, and forms of partial erasure. Achille Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40, esp. 17–22, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.

hydrogen bubbles rise but appear to fall, like rain, tears or sweat, turning a technical procedure into something that feels unsettlingly human. The submerged face belongs to Bagja, a nickel-mining worker whom Bagus came to know and who was violently abused by his employer.[16] As nickel slowly accumulates across his features, Bagja's face becomes increasingly obscured, forming a material allegory of how extraction layers harm until individual lives become difficult to see. Yet from our position shaped by distance and relative safety, far from the mines of Sulawesi and the Maluku Islands, this image is not entirely unfamiliar, only less explicit. Nickel sits in our palms and pockets every day. Our phones, screens and batteries lie closer to our bodies than our knowledge of how they are produced. Have these materials come to know our bodies more intimately than we know theirs?

Perhaps these artworks ask us to consider what happens when the systems that produce the materials we take for granted or know so little about begin to hesitate, stall or even refuse. The works open spaces in which the aim is not to imagine perfected futures but to attend to small ruptures, moments when matter refuses to behave as industry expects. If there is a future to think toward, it may emerge from these interruptions and fractures in the system, where other forms of life begin to make themselves felt.

Yet as tempting as it is to imagine systemic collapse as a pathway to repair, these artworks remind us of who would bear the brunt of such upheaval. It is not consumers but labourers on the ground, both human and nonhuman, whose survival is already entangled with extractive economies. Extraction operates, above all, as an optic. It hides its labour, conceals its geographies, abstracts its material and disperses its consequences. Nickel becomes a battery; palm fruit becomes cooking oil; ore becomes electric futures. Toxicity drifts as haze; waste is buried out of sight; the plantation forecloses the ecologies it depends on to live. Extraction functions only when the world is disciplined into blindness, when ubiquity erases materiality. As Tsing notes, capitalist extraction depends on "imbuing both people and things with alienation," removing them from their life worlds so they can circulate as assets.[17] In this part of Southeast Asia, this alienation is visible in the monocultures of palm oil, the logistical flows of nickel and the archipelagic composition that enables such barriers of opacity through separation.

Rather than revealing hidden truths or offering clarifying diagnoses, the artworks in this exhibition ask us to dwell in uncomfortable, unresolved contradictions. Bagus and Elia do not dispel the fog of extraction. They teach us to see within it, to recognise that thinking materially from Southeast Asia requires learning how to notice what extraction has taught us not to see. It begins here.

[16] For a recent example of escalating violence and exploitation within Indonesia's nickel industry, including allegations of forced labour, unsafe working conditions, wage theft, accidents and protests, see recent reporting on working conditions at Indonesia's largest nickel sites such as IMIP: A. Anantha Lakshmi and Diana Mariska, "Indonesia: Workers allege 'production first, safety later' culture at IMIP nickel complex leads to unsafe conditions & rising accidents," *Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*, accessed November 28, 2025, https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/indonesia-imip-nickel-park-workers-allege-poor-safety-accidents-deaths-union-retaliation-restricted-movement-of-chinese-*staff*/.

[17] *Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 5.

↖ Bagus Pandega. Detail of *Fabric of the Earth*. 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

↗ Elia Nurvista. Detail of *The Frontiers* as part of *Long Hanging Fruits* series. 2020. Image courtesy of the artist.

Aesthetic Reversal Against Irreversible Damage

Brigitta Isabella

I had never seen an oil palm fruit or a nickel ore before writing this text. Most readers probably have not either. Yet our lives are almost certainly embedded—metabolically and electronically—with these materials, which are both the object and subject of Elia Nurvista and Bagus Pandega's joint exhibition, *Nafasan Bumi ~ An Endless Harvest.*

An oil palm fruit is a tightly packed, reddish-brown cluster that grows around a spiky stem. It resembles a date fruit, though its skin is glossier and harder, protecting an oily flesh and a kernel. Nickel ore is a dense chunk of mottled grey and green earth, containing not only nickel but also traces of iron and copper. Modern alchemy has rendered both oil palm fruit and nickel ore into agents of transformation. The reddish fruit slips into the unseen through recipes and formulae that keep creams smooth, sauces uniform, and fried foods crisp. The greenish chunks, in turn, become a metallic skin for our appliances, pliable yet strong, resisting corrosion, coating intricate forms with a silvery gloss and shielding them from heat. They are here, even now as I write this text: in the butter of my afternoon cake and in the battery of my laptop. They interact in a world that anthropologist Michael Taussig describes as "theater and a sort of magic act in which the actors indulge in make-believe in a vast public secret which nobody knows and everyone knows."[1]

[1] Michael Taussig, *Palma Africana* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

Palm oil and nickel are "super-natural" raw materials, insofar as they powerfully influence the most mundane gestures of our daily lives. They are invisible and invincible, not because they are unseen, but because they are ubiquitous, so thoroughly present within global supply chains. As a commodity form, however, the enchantment of this supernatural material also gives way to rupture. Palm oil and nickel reveal themselves as unstable agents, generating friction and violence across landscapes and communities within the extractive machinery of capital that is at once ordinary and catastrophic.

These hidden forces are not only economic but also aesthetic, and artists like Elia Nurvista and Bagus Pandega have begun to make them visible. What, then, appears when art reverses commodities into their raw state? When the palm oil in our food and the nickel in our batteries are made unfamiliar again, as if melting back into slimy oil or regressing into monstrous ore? Elia and Bagus stage precisely this kind of aesthetic reversal. It is a theatre of the impossible, where industrial commodities appear to revert to raw material yet never attain purity—performing instead the sticky entanglements in which the natural and the industrial, the colonial and the postcolonial, the human and the nonhuman remain inseparable. In doing so, the artists mimic the industrial process by reprocessing critical materials into, well, obviously, art commodities, but ones that expose the magic of commodification and propose a kind of counter-magic spell to turn stories of struggles and resilience into renewable energy for critical imagination.

Aesthetic Reversal Against Irreversible Damage

During their research phase, Elia and Bagus faced barriers to entry into plantations and mining facilities, the guarded epicentres of Indonesia's extractive economy. These sites are what Jeff Diamanti calls "terminal landscapes," both the beginning of industrial infrastructures that connect global circuits of production and the endpoint of ecological life, bringing terminal illness to the Earth itself.[2] Production facilities are sensitive, even deadly spaces, not only due to the physical hazards of heavy machinery, but also because of the volatile relationships between capital, ecology and labour. They displace Indigenous communities, drive deforestation, destroy biodiversity and accelerate climate change, generating landscapes of violence that extend far beyond the sites themselves. Without direct access to the sites of capital accumulation, Elia and Bagus turn instead to the historical materiality of palm oil and nickel itself to expose the ideological and ecological weight they carry.

Elia's strategy of aesthetic reversal begins with the set of sculptures in *Bodies of Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*. She appropriates the form of Italian Renaissance colossal statues typically carved in marble, a material that once signified wealth, durability and the glory of European humanism. Elia's sculptures enact the muscular, yet exhausted body of a plantation worker that appears cracked and fissured, its surfaces melting into lava-like streams. Where Renaissance marble immortalised human mastery and the idealised, civilised body, Elia's resin sculptures cast the metabolic reality of contemporary human existence: saturated with palm oil, a chemical commodity that extends the shelf life of our food at the expense of ecological endurance. The durability enabled by palm oil is paradoxical and achieved only through the disposability of contract labour and the destruction of nature. The sculptures collapse these two registers of durability, exposing that what appears

[2] Jeff Diamanti, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 10.

stable and sustaining is, in fact, propped up by systems of extraction and ruin. It carves out what Walter Mignolo identifies as "the darker side of Renaissance:" the role of humanism in providing intellectual justification for colonial expansion, displacing Indigenous people not only from their land but also from their knowledge and way of living with nature.[3]

↓ Work in progress of *Bodies of Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*. 2026. Image courtesy of the artist.

[3] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of The Renaissance* (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

↓ Elia Nurvista working on one of the sculptures of *Bodies of Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*. 2026. Image courtesy of the artist.

If her resin sculpture exposes the ideological afterlife of Renaissance humanism, Elia's use of the living debris of the oil palm trees grounds her critique in the natural and social realities of the plantation system. In the wild, oil palm can live up to 200 years, yet within the cycle of extraction, their economic life in plantations is cut short to just 25–30 years, to prevent the trees from growing too tall for efficient commercial harvesting. By reclaiming abandoned tree trunks, *Bodies of Penumbra* reverses the logic of productivity, transforming what is deemed obsolete into a stark monument to the disposability of both nature and human labour under the monocropping regime. She also repurposes oil palm fronds (*pelepah sawit*) in these sculptures to evoke gestures of community resilience amid ecological ruin and economic precarity. For large plantations, the fronds are mere waste. Yet local women have inverted this value system by weaving the discarded leaves into baskets and selling them for extra income.

Contrary to the capitalist myth that palm oil brings jobs and prosperity, the corporate plantations employ only one worker per five hectares.[4] This means that when big corporations clear land, more people are displaced than employed. Even when local people do find work in plantations, the gendered division of labour puts women in precarious situations. Usually, men are hired to harvest the oil palm fruits, while women are assigned to tasks such as pesticide spraying and clearing waste. These tasks are underpaid, if not dismissed altogether as unpaid "help" to their husbands.[5]

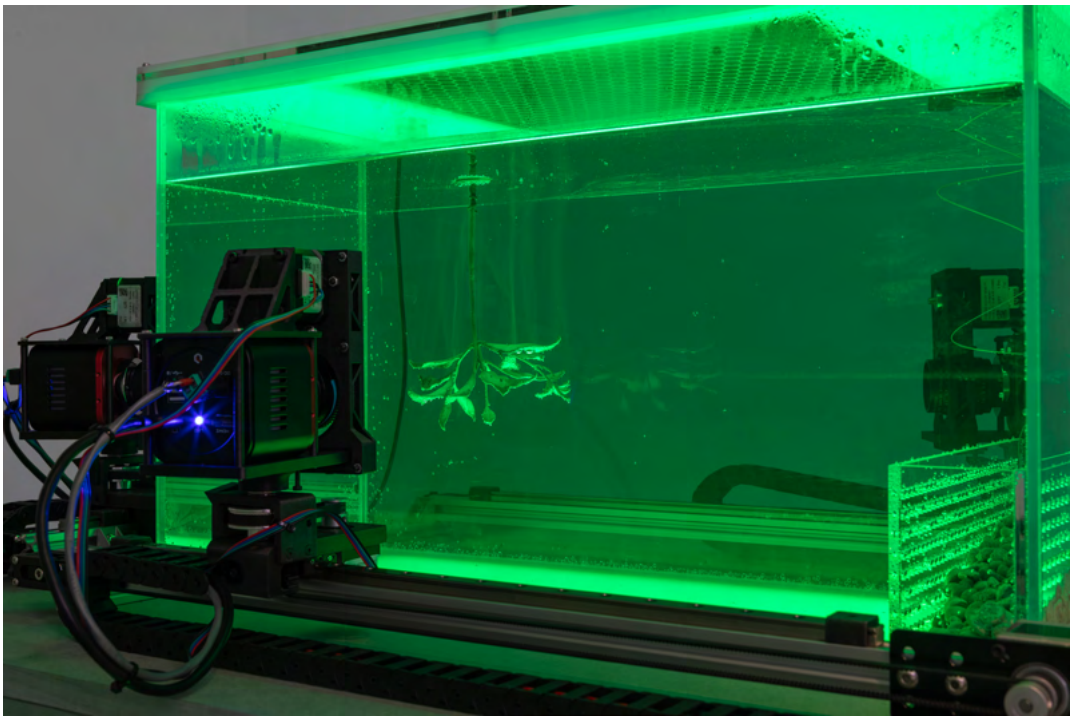
[4] Tania Li, "Deforestation and development: A decolonial perspective from Indonesia," *Decolonizing Geography*, 11 February 2022, https://decolonisegeography.com/blog/2022/02/deforestation-and-development-a-decolonial-perspective-from-indonesia/.

[5] Hariati Sinaga, "Toxic Care: Plantation Maintenance Work and Social Reproduction on Palm Oil Monoculture Plantations," *Jurnal Perempuan* 28, no. 3, (2023): 199–212.

Amid this bleak landscape, alternative value chains are emerging as women artisans and home-based producers reclaim the so-called waste of the palm oil industry. For example, empty fruit bunches are used for paper pulp and palm trunks for furniture, transforming these residues into resources for sustaining household livelihoods. The socio-natural materials in Elia's work stage these tensions, holding together both the violence of global commodity chains and the fragile practices of survival that persist within the forest community.

In her hanging textile *Exhausted*, Elia layers drawings that trace the primary entanglement of colonialism and capitalism in the global circulation of palm oil linking Indonesia and West Africa, where women's bodies and labour are central yet systematically devalued. Elia employs the batik technique, thereby retracing the trans-continental movement of batik culture through colonial trade routes. Instead of using paraffin wax, common in the modern batik industry, Elia opts for palm oil wax, endorsed by sustainable palm oil alliance groups to promote value creation of palm oil raw materials in Indonesia and reduce reliance on imported and non-renewable materials. Indonesia is the world's largest producer and exporter of Crude Palm Oil (CPO). Yet the highest value in the palm oil supply chain is captured elsewhere, in wealthier countries that process CPO into soaps, cosmetics, food additives and biofuels. Foregrounding the reddish-orange hue of CPO in the textile work makes visible yet another layer of reversal, one that moves from the refined derivatives we consume daily back to the crude, raw state of the material itself.

↓ Bagus Pandega, *Anim Wraksa*. 2025. Photo by Daniel Pérez. Courtesy of Swiss Institute.
An updated version of this artwork, *Gurat Lara (Scars)* (2026), will be presented in this exhibition.



Palm oil and nickel are two distinct materials, yet both are deeply entangled within international supply chains amidst the global move towards a greener economy. When the European Union imposed restrictions on palm oil to enforce "deforestation-free" products, Indonesia retaliated by banning nickel ore exports to Europe. The stickiness of palm oil and nickel has triggered an unresolved trade dispute that reveals the entanglement of neo-imperial power and postcolonial oligarchic interests.

Bagus's works point to the critical paradox within the green transition of the global economy. Like the oil palm plantation industry, nickel mining and processing factories also promise job creation. But as his installation *Gurat Lara* (*Scars*) exposes, the myth of opportunity often hides dehumanising labour conditions. Bagus casts a palm-sized, brass-plated 3D-printed head of a nickel worker in Halmahera, whom he encountered during his research. The worker recounted how he was beaten by his manager simply for asking for time off to perform Salat (Islamic prayer ritual)—a story of workplace harassment that never surfaced in mainstream media. Immersed in a nickel electroplating bath, the head undergoes a slow transformation. Electroplating, typically used to produce smooth, glossy finishes, instead corrodes the figure into a bubbling, monstrous abstraction. Cameras surrounding the aquarium document the reversal process of nickel electroplating: what should polish and preserve, instead deforms and unsettles.

↓ **Bagus Pandega holding raw nickel from the smelter in his palm. Image courtesy of the artist.**

Nickel is essential for batteries and renewable technologies, yet it is equally bound up with ecological destruction and the deceptions of industrial greenwashing. In his machine installation *L.O.O.P (Less Organic Operation Procedure)* (2026), Bagus assembles a simulation of the green transition that goes nowhere. A green conveyor belt circulates nickel pellets which fall to produce sound at the end of the loop. The system is powered by electricity, which, when it opens at Singapore Art Museum (SAM), is most likely still derived from fossil fuels. The speed of the conveyor's movement, however, is determined by the living signals of tropical plants placed at the installation's centre. Using an open-source biofeedback system, Bagus channels the plants' microelectric activity to modulate the rhythm of the machine. The sound of the falling pellets is converted into MIDI notes, transmitted wirelessly, and played through a music box attached to a large wooden log of an endangered tree. This sonic assemblage turns the mechanical industrial circulation into an unstable composition, in which plants and machines are caught in a reciprocal loop rather than a relation of domination.

Behind the machine's technical sophistication are stories of the multiple economies embedded in its making. Bagus sourced the green conveyor belt from a manufacturer in Jakarta. He built the stainless-steel container in his studio using his artisanal craftsmanship, purchased nickel pellets from a smallholder smelter in Konawe Selatan and drew on open-source biohacking data for the code. The sensors, transmitters, and synthesisers all contain nickel and have come from Chinese companies. Together, these materials testify to intersecting circuits: industrial mass production and home-based enterprise, mechanical labour and artisanal skill, consumer goods and free software. Yet the story of nickel itself remains dominated by unequal exchange in the global value chain. The green transition, materially framed as a shift from fossil fuels to metals, from coal to nickel, continues to reproduce the same concentration of power, a transition of wealth from one conglomerate to another.

Through unique yet resonant strategies, Elia and Bagus show how palm oil and nickel are not only artistic mediums but also agents that condense the entanglements of labour, ecology, technology and capital. The artists reverse the commodity form of the materials and, by doing so, make visible the entangled histories of dispossession and survival labour. Yet art cannot undo the ecological damage already set in motion. With global emissions still rising, scientists warn that reversing climate overshoot without drastic systemic change is dangerously misguided. Lifestyle choices, however well-intentioned, remain inadequate. Structural reversal is required, especially in confronting the fact that the wealthiest industrialised nations in the Global North are responsible for most excessive carbon emissions, while working-class populations in the Global South are bound by systemic conditions rather than individual preference.[6] In this light, the significance of artists' engagement with materials becomes clearer. Artists are not outside the intricate web of supernatural reality that is at once violently present and eerily concealed in the theatre of our daily life. The ways they source, handle and transform materials are conditioned by the political and economic systems that shape the artists' life histories and their access to the material itself. Yet artists and their materials can, in turn, expose the systems that govern them and reshape how we imagine those systems otherwise. Elia and Bagus's aesthetic reversal insists that materials are never neutral: they are always already political, ecological and historical.

To this end, I want to gesture toward another kind of aesthetic reversal—one that looks back into environmental art history.

[6] The total emissions of the richest 1% are greater than the poorest half of the global population combined. See more at "Carbon Inequality," *Global Inequality*, October 7, 2025, https://globalinequality.org/carbon-inequality/.

By the late 20th century, Southeast Asia's forests had shrunk dramatically, from 250 million hectares in 1900 to just 60 million in 1989, continuing to disappear at more than a million hectares each year. Scholars link this devastation to neoliberal economic reforms and illiberal authoritarian regimes that entrenched extractive access to land and wealth since the 1970s.[7] The rise of contemporary environmental art across Southeast Asia unfolded alongside this expansion of global capitalism. In response, Southeast Asian artists have done more than adopt environmental themes; they have cultivated a heightened material consciousness, an attentiveness to the conditions, agencies and histories embedded in the objects they have worked with. This trajectory, which anticipates a path to Elia and Bagus's practices, suggests a new set of art-historical inquiries: how have environmental changes shaped the ways artists engage with their materials? And what do the art materials reveal about the region's environmental histories?

One paradox that begins any preliminary index of material histories of environmental art is that the heightened consciousness of material emerged alongside conceptual art, a practice often presumed to be immaterial in its privileging of ideas. In 1975, Indonesia's Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement, GSRB) rejected the modern conventions of painting and sculpture in favour of everyday items—doors, mirrors, plastic dolls, beds—mobilised as playful materials for their critique of the art establishment. Philosopher Toeti Heraty interpreted GSRB's exhibition not as "visual poetry" but as a turn toward concreteness, revealing material not as inert matter but as an entity with agency. As she wrote: "Objects do not become material again, but other subjects that exist close by and which we take out of their functional network. We do not utilise them again, but allow them to speak for themselves. We are impressed by their existence."[8] Whereas dominant art writing has tended to treat material as a passive medium for an artist's form, style or ideas, Heraty foregrounded a politics of materiality in which material itself acts, disrupts and shapes relations, hence challenging art history's habitual privileging of biography and form over the material's own histories and capacities.

The idea that the material could become an artistic agent paved the way for another trajectory, one that signalled a sharper entanglement between materials and the environment from which they were drawn. Artists began to work not only with ready-made objects but also with natural matter, engaging directly with ecological processes and landscapes under threat. This shift reflected the broader context of accelerated extraction and urban expansion across Southeast Asia. As forests were cleared and rivers were polluted in the name of developmentalism, the artists' turn to organic materials registered both a sense of loss and a search for alternative ways of grounding artistic practice. By the 1980s, the intersection between the materiality of art and the imperatives of environmental activism had become more explicit, often manifesting as installation art and site-specific exhibitions.

[7] Mark Poffenberger, "People in the forest: community forestry experiences from Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development* 5, no. 1 (2006), 57–69.

[8] Toety Heraty, "All Kinds of Art, Practice and Theory (1975)," in *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader Vol. II*, eds. T. K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores (National Gallery Singapore, 2023), 1221.

This ecological turn became more visible in early site-specific experiments. In 1981, the *Los Baños Siteworks* exhibition in the Philippines gathered thirty participants—mostly students, including future luminaries such as Lani Maestro and critic Ray Albano—on a three-hectare campus field surrounded by mountains. Using twigs, bamboo, rocks, and leaves collected on site, the participants created seventeen installations. In his review, artist Junyee reflected that working with "raw materials as medium" in the open air fostered a new "object-atmosphere relationship," situating art within an expanded spatial matrix.[9] For Albano, the event opened a new path for theorising installation art. He argued that the "literal things" used by artists not only granted new freedoms but also imposed constraints, requiring them to follow "the logical lines of tendencies their materials would go: spreading, hanging, stretching, laying down, arbitrarily."[10] His emphasis on the interdependence of artist and material, echoing Toeti Heraty's earlier reflections, signalled an emergent "material turn" in Southeast Asian environmental art—one that foreshadowed contemporary debates on new materialism and the entanglement of human and non-human agencies.

Beyond the new matrix of artist-material-site/space enabled by the artist's impulse to connect with nature, another strand of environmental art shifted attention to methods of inquiry that led to research-based art. In Malaysia, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam employed photomontage to critique the ideology of developmentalism and its ecological fallout. Her *Kenyataan/Statement* series (1973–1979) juxtaposed images of children deprived of basic needs with photographs and texts warning of the rapid development of Damansara Heights and Bangsar. As art historian Sarena Abdullah observes, Nirmala's works resembled "presentation boards," pragmatic in form and echoing the documentary strategies of campaigns designed to warn a broad public of ecological crisis.[11] In Indonesia, similar impulses surfaced in collaborations between artists and NGOs. The *Pameran Proses '85* in Jakarta, sponsored by the Indonesian Forum for Environment (WALHI) and the Network for Forest Conservation in Indonesia (SKEPHI), addressed mercury pollution linked to Minamata disease in coastal communities. Participating artists conducted basic research such as interviewing residents, taking photographs and keeping field notes—working like amateur ethnographers.[12] In these cases, artistic inquiries into environmental damage adopted the procedures of research and advocacy, transforming information into both aesthetic form and activist force.

The material turn in environmental art extended into an ethical turn in artists' consciousness of how their materials were sourced and resourced. In 1980 Singapore, Tang Da Wu's exhibition *Earth Work* at the National Museum Art Gallery arose from his

[9] Junyee, "A Halfway Ground: Los Banos Site Works (1981)," in *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader Vol. II*, eds. T. K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores (National Gallery Singapore, 2023), 972.

[10] Raymundo Albano, "Installation: A Case for Hangings (1981)," in *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader Vol. II*, eds. T. K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores (National Gallery Singapore, 2023), 1248–49.

[11] Sarena Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," *Indian Journal of Arts* 5, no.16 (2015): 37–38.

[12] F.X. Harsono cited in Haruko Kumakura, "Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi—Pendekatan, Praktik, dan Pemikiran sejak Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia 1970an," in *Masakan Sepanjang Zaman: Bunga Rampai Seni Rupa Baru 1975–1989,* ed. Hyphen– (Komunitas Bambu, 2024), 143.

concern about soil erosion caused by the redevelopment of his neighbourhood. Working with land, rocks, mud and mineral pigments to create drawings and installations, Tang emphasised a relational rather than instrumental approach to matter, declaring, "I am not the master of my materials, I do not wish to control them. I am interested in making a relationship between me and my material, not in dominating completely."[13] This ethical turn in artistic practice could even reshape the very choice of medium. Thai artist Monthīan Bunmā, while studying in Paris, lamented the depletion of Thai teak and urged a shift away from destructive habits. In his 1987 letter to his wife, he wrote, "We don't have enough Thai teak left to be sculpting away at it. We should change our old way of thinking, or if we want to use wood, we should select a different kind that takes less time to grow." Eventually, Bunmā abandoned wood altogether, insisting, "A piece of art on a mountain with no trees has less value than a single bean sprout."[14] These artists' engagement with materials underscored a growing recognition that materials are not a passive medium but active carriers of ecological histories and ideological weight. It called for an ethical consciousness of materials by acknowledging the limits of the artist's control over creation and allowing materials to assert their own creative agency.

This historical sketch of moments when contemporary art, materiality and environmental activism intersect across Southeast Asia allows us to situate contemporary artists' practices such as Elia Nurvista's and Bagus Pandega's. On the one hand, they extend the material and ethical turn along the lineage of conceptual experimentation, research-based practice and material consciousness. On the other hand, they shift the focus of material inquiry. Whereas environmental art practices in the 1970s and 1980s often engaged with natural materials threatened by deforestation and industrial development, such as wood and earth, Elia and Bagus turn to palm oil and nickel as commodities at the heart of global capitalism. These materials are not mere victims of development but rather actors embodying the paradox of destruction and progress that defines contemporary resource economies. If earlier generations were enchanted by the concreteness of ready-made objects and the rawness of natural materials, Elia and Bagus probe the entanglement of the natural and the industrial that underpins our daily calories and energies—an index of our deepening bodily dependency on the spell of extractive capitalism. This shift in material focus also reorients the sites of artistic engagement. Whereas earlier artists often turned to forests, mountains and beaches as spaces to contemplate nature, Elia and Bagus draw us into the industrial landscapes of factories, plantations, and mines—the deforested terrains where romanticisation of nature is no longer materially possible.

Across every shift in art history, materials carry complicated stories of extraction and survival, of violence and creativity, of destruction and the fragile possibility of repair. Yet the historical lineage of environmental art is not merely a backdrop for aesthetic reversal. It is a reminder of how artists have always risen to crisis, and a persistent provocation to imagine how we might respond to futures closing in on irreversible environmental damage.

[13] Tang Da Wu cited in Charmaine Toh, "Notes on Tang Da Wu's Earth Work," in *Earth Work 1979* (National Gallery Singapore, 2013), 13.

[14] Montien Boonma, "Letter to Noom (1987)," in *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader Vol. II*, eds. T. K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores (National Gallery Singapore, 2023), 933.

↖ Bagus Pandega. *Anim Wraksa*. 2025. Photograph by Daniel Pérez, courtesy of Swiss Institute.

↗ Bagus Pandega. Detail of *Anim Wraksa*. 2025. Photograph by Daniel Pérez, courtesy of Swiss Institute.

From Making to Shifting Thoughts on the work of Bagus Pandega

Martin Germann

Bagus Pandega is one of the most remarkable younger voices from Southeast Asia, with an artistic practice that centres on ecological concerns against the backdrop of colonial exploitation, employing advanced technology in a uniquely DIY manner as his medium. I visited him at his studio in March 2025 in Bandung, Indonesia. This hilly, slightly cooler former Dutch colonial town can be reached by a new rapid train that connects Jakarta with the slightly elevated area, which also hosts the Institut Teknologi Bandung (Bandung Institute of Technology) where Bagus—like many other Indonesian artists—studied. The studio is situated on the outskirts of the city and is split into two levels: the messy, chaotic, sprawling ground floor where Bagus was in the midst of preparing an upcoming double show with a vibrant group of friends and assistants, and the upper-level studio, where his wife and partner, Kei Imazu, was preparing projects in a rather organised manner—occasionally, these two collaborate.

↓ Bagus Pandega & Kei Imazu. *Artificial Green by Nature Green 4.1.* 2025. Image courtesy of White Cube.

At the intersection of the two floors, I encountered Pickle, an iguana with a rare albino condition that caused her skin to appear bright yellow. Most of the time, she remained stationary, hardly moving, and coupled with the fact that she was almost blind, I deduced that Pickle probably lived with a different perception of time (and space). Shortly after my stay in his studio, Pickle unfortunately passed away, and her death made me think of essential factors in the work of her "hosts," one of which was Bagus Pandega. The ancestral line of Pickle goes back millions of years, way longer than human beings have populated this planet, and her arrival in Indonesia was most probably due to the value given to her rare constitution by breeders and collectors—the "choice" to put value on Earth's life in monetary terms—of rationalising the world. Bagus's choice to adopt this outcast and remove her from the framework of natural selection based on competition is not coincidental; it connects too fittingly to the larger subjects in Bagus's uniquely sharp and occasionally witty artistic reversal of common human-nature relations.

Speaking about human intervention into natural processes on this planet, one can easily claim that these have increased to further extremes since the start of colonialism and have accelerated even more rapidly over the last 30 years of globalisation and digitalisation at large—following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the near establishment of a global capitalist monoculture. The relentless, perpetual exploitation of the Earth's resources is undeniable. In 2020, for the first time in the history of the planet, the yearly produced human-made mass exceeded all biomass—

[1] Emily Elhacham et al., "Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass," *Nature*, October 7, 2025, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-3010-5.

"anthropogenic mass" has ultimately taken over.[1] This ultimately ties in with what scholars term "modernism," "colonialism," and the "Anthropocene" in an alarming, tangible manner. African philosopher Achille Mbembe called this respective intensification the perpetual "compulsion" of the earth,[2] elegantly evoking the Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods as the philosophical core of the catastrophe humanity seems to inflict on its home.

In the postwar period from the 1950s to 1970s, both European and non-European artists and scientists anticipated already the dramatic consequences of Western expansion and growth, as consumer consumption increased alongside environmental pollution that began to threaten their booming economies. Artists like Jean Tinguely mobilised industrially produced materials into eclectic sculptural compositions, while practitioners such as German-American Hans Haacke and Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña helped destabilise the modernist notion of the autonomous artwork through their respective process-based practices. From their distinct geographic, post-humanist and postcolonial artistic positions, these artists placed essential planetary forces at the centre of their artworks, incorporating wind, water, or other elements from the Earth's cycles. During this same period, initiatives such as MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club developed a culture of tinkering, sharing knowledge freely and creatively solving problems. This hacker ethos of exploration and open collaboration became central to an active maker culture, which occasionally intersected with the art world, as in the case of Hans Haacke, whose work also addressed the rising significance of computer technologies.

Bagus's artistic practice can be seen as a contemporary continuation of concerns from these pioneering times in the fine arts, when another core motivation consisted of expanding an art world defined exclusively by painting and sculpture. It is precisely the historical function of the medium of painting that Bagus analyses, reverses, and builds upon in co-production with his wife and partner Kei Imazu. *Artificial Green by Nature Green*, in which both have worked on since 2019, features an expansive canvas where cycles of image presentation and destruction alternate. The basic underpainting has been hand-painted by Kei Imazu and varies with each iteration in which the work has been presented. Two automated systems built by Bagus operate in opposition to each other. While one mechanism paints one painting daily based on a sketch by Kei Imazu, its counterpart machine removes it afterwards with water. The removal device interprets live bioelectric impulses from an actual palm plant, converting these signals into varied brush movements, rhythmic shifts and water applications.

Each three-day period witnesses the emergence of a distinct image—scenes of palm oil cultivation, transportation workers, tropical flora, an imprisoned tiger, a poached elephants or an orangutan family sketched out by Imazu and translated by the painting machine—before being slowly eliminated during the subsequent forty-eight hours, making way for the next visual narrative. In its totality, it functions as an organic composition where the living plant dictates the rhythm of the painting's removal, reflecting the fragile equilibrium of Indonesia's rainforests as they face escalating encroachment from palm oil agriculture.

One underlying idea of painting from the Renaissance and the invention of central perspective has been the notion of "capturing" the world in a frame—to control

[2] In his book "The Earthly Community," Achille Mbembe describes the geological exploitation of the earth as "compulsion of the earth," more here: Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia* (V2_Publishing, 2022), 6.

it, inhabit it and eventually even "colonise" it. This argument extends to the desire to calculate the world and render it available in its "entirety,"[3] as Martin Heidegger once described. For Heidegger, the essence of modern technology lies not in the machines themselves but in how it frames our understanding of reality. Technology reveals the world as a resource—or "standing-reserve"—that is ready to be exploited, ordered and made available for human purposes.

If we consider the painting's illusionist separation between figure and background, it seems that the "ground" is fully taking over the painterly editorial process. The background, which in classical paintings often took a decorative, secondary role to articulate the figures of the narrative, is now asserting itself and becoming an agent in its own right. Just as the Earth itself seems to become active and alive during a climate crisis—no longer a passive backdrop to human activity but an active force demanding recognition—Imazu and Bagus propose a flexible and mutable framework that undermines any fixed idea of an image. This refusal of stability mirrors a fundamental shift in our relationship with both nature and technology. Whereas pre-modern technology operated in accordance *with* nature and sought to bring out the best in it, modern technology challenges nature, forcing it to meet our demands. In this respect, the work can be seen as a reconciliation of human-invented technological processes and processes inherent to the natural environment, an attempt to restore a collaborative rather than exploitative relationship between human systems and the living world.

While image production often stands at the beginning of colonial desires to "capture" the world, industrial production and the exploitation of the Earth follow after. This temporal sequence is also reflected in Bagus's practice. In recent years, he researched nickel, which in Indonesia was first documented in the early 20th century by Dutch and Canadian engineers. However, large-scale exploitation did not occur until the New Order era (1966–1998), when the Suharto administration fostered extractive industries through networks of political and economic patronage. Since then, global demand for nickel has dramatically increased due to its necessity, for example, in the construction of lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles. This surge coincides with a moment in which ongoing deforestation is paralleled by a lack of employment opportunities and underdeveloped environmental and social infrastructure in the immediate surroundings. The hunger for growth in "developed" areas of the world has clearly led to an externalisation of the environmental crisis into less "developed" parts of the world, perpetuating a cycle of ongoing destruction.

L.O.O.P (Less Overgrown Organic Procedure) (2026) is the new title of an installation which Bagus produced an updated version of in this exhibition. It deals with respective themes through the construction of a ten-metre-long conveyor belt woven through the galleries its speed adjusts according to the biofeedback of tropical plants. Similar to *Artificial Green by Nature Green*, it operates continuously, but instead of generating and erasing images, it employs raw materials for industrial production: the belt, modelled on industrial mining machinery, transports pieces of nickel ore Bagus acquired in Indonesia. At the belt's end, the ore falls to produce sound (which, in the case of Bagus's presentation in Basel, triggered the functioning of the subsequent works in the exhibition, just like a domino effect).

[3] For Heidegger, the essence of modern technology is not the machines themselves but the way it frames our understanding of reality. Technology reveals the world as a resource, or "standing-reserve," that is ready to be exploited, ordered, and made available for human purposes, see more: Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Harper & Row, 1977).

Rather than positioning technology as an agent of control or extraction, the work imagines it as part of a living circuit—responsive, adaptive and mutually dependent. Nickel, hardwood, water and even the faint electrical currents of plants become active participants in these systems, each material carrying signals, energy and memory. Within these delicate feedback loops, the boundaries between the mechanical and the organic begin to blur: machines sense and respond like organisms, while natural elements take on mechanical functions, conducting, filtering and transmitting. The result is not a hierarchy of human invention over nature but a choreography of co-creation, where every component—metal, mineral, wood and leaf—alters and is altered in return.

↓ Bagus Pandega. Detail of *L.O.O.P. (Loss Overgrown Organic Pulse)*. 2025. Image courtesy of Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.

From an economic perspective, Bagus's production line can be understood as a counter-production to the principles of Fordism characterised by mass production, assembly lines and countless standardised parts made to reach maximum efficiency. Bagus uses the motif of the production line as a counterintuitive awareness, such as in another recent installation he presented at Art Basel in 2025. Titled "Fabric of the Earth," it addressed the ongoing consequences of the Sidoarjo mudflow disaster in East Java, Indonesia—a catastrophic man-made environmental crisis triggered by a natural gas drilling accident in 2006 that submerged villages and irrevocably altered the region's ecology.

The installation appropriated the form of a FABLAB (fabrication laboratory) to create a site-specific intervention that functions simultaneously as an exhibition space, working laboratory and protest venue. Central to the work are 3D printers that perform live fabrication of sculptural objects using mud extracted directly

from the disaster site, transforming the material evidence of ecological destruction into "aesthetic objects." A row of wall-mounted works serves a dual purpose as both visual components and functional tool racks, providing audiences with resources to continue the fabrication process independently, thereby extending the work's participatory dimensions beyond the gallery space.

Bagus positions himself as both artist and technologist to interrogate the industrial processes responsible for the disaster. The FABLAB is traditionally a space associated with innovation and technological optimism—here, it is transformed into a site for memory work and community knowledge-building, so that Bagus proposes technology as a democratised, community-owned resource rather than an instrument of corporate extraction. This convergence of maker culture and activism addresses the urgent need for civic, bottom-up responses to institutional failure. The sculptural products themselves resist conventional aesthetic resolution, instead embracing symbolic action and messy re-enactment as means of maintaining visibility for ongoing environmental devastations that dominant institutions would prefer to relegate to the past.

One should be careful though not to charge Bagus's work with too much ethical weight. Fully aware of the political limits of art and the striking relativity of the subject's respective position within a multipolar world, as described by Mi You,[4] Bagus, as an artist, remains interested in playing with and expanding aesthetic backends. From the beginning of his practice, he played with makeshift solutions, but less as an articulate criticism of consumerism. Rather, his practice follows questions of form, functionality and relevance aligned with the specific locality of Indonesia, along with its distinctive economic and social ecosystem.

Filled with a certain mischievousness, Bagus doesn't completely dismiss advanced technological knowledge in favour of a perhaps naïve, perhaps propagandistic full application of "Indigenous knowledge"—an ultimately unrealistic return to a pre-modern era. Instead, in all his works, he fuses different forms of knowledge production and intelligence into something new, serving as a reconciling paradigm that fuses installation and sculpture while making use of sound as one of its most central aesthetic driving forces. As a hobby musician, Bagus has always been fascinated by the porous, shape-shifting qualities of sound, and his artistic practice departs essentially from the unstable, durational nature of sound waves. Sound plays a key role throughout his installations: connecting different bodies of work, choreographing exhibitions, crossing borders of all kinds—ultimately, it is synthesisers that translate the organic processes of plants into sound in his works. "Sound is distance. (...) It's a form of material that needs time to travel. And it's mechanical."[5]

In considering sound's nomadic and free nature, Bagus's work connects to what Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui recently described as a state of homelessness, a world where neither Western nor Eastern philosophical and religious conceptions create common ground: "Modern technology is the end product of European nihilism, which began with the forgetting of the question of Being and the effort to master beings. The interposition of technology into the world has produced a generalised homelessness, and has blocked the path toward the questioning of Being."[6] A focus on a one-dimensional perspective on technology and innovation as the sole and remaining

[4] Mi You, *Art in a Multipolar World*, (Hatje Cantz, 2025).

[5] Bagus Pandega, in a conversation with the artist, October 2025.

[6] Yuk Hui, *Post-Europe*, (MIT Press, 2024), 6.

orientation in life, as it is driven by the massive economic exploitation of "users," fosters a generalised homelessness further, creating insecurities about identity and belonging amid global disorientation and polarisation in the 21st century.

Just as Bagus and his family provided a home for Pickle, the albino iguana, the experience of his durational installations provides a temporary space in which common hierarchies between humans and nature are temporarily reversed and decentred. Or, put differently, they offer a merging of poetry and machine, commodity and material, institutional container and art object, nature and culture: these binaries merge in a "third" dimension that defies clear categorisation. From here, Bagus's works act as extended organs of this planet, which quintessentially belongs to no one. It is that form of perpetual making in his artistic practice which can slowly lead to cultural and social shifts, step by step, just like the stepper motor that stands at the heart of most of his works' functionality.

↗ Bagus Pandega. *Fabric of the Earth*. 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and ROH Projects. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti.

↗ Elia Nurvista. *Long Hanging Fruits*. 2022. Mural, video, food. Courtesy of Jan van Eyck Academie.

Elia Nurvista's *Long Hanging Fruits*: Reading Palm and Sharing Instant Noodles

Anca Rujoiu

For her workshop in Romania's capital city, Bucharest, the artist Elia Nurvista confirmed that all she needed were palm-oil-containing products such as instant noodles and Nutella, which will be served to the participants during the session. Elia's brief list of wishes sparked my curiosity. I found myself checking labels at regular supermarkets in Romania to see which products contained palm oil. I became inquisitive about what we define as "local" items, products that occupy an unbreakable place in our cultural memory, are tied to a sense of place, and offer those who migrated from home a way to find their bearings in the fleeting moment of taste.[1] Though the attribute "local" was not an explicit condition in Elia's list of products, her artwork, which is steeped in palm oil, encourages you, whether you encountered it in Bucharest, Maastricht, or Riyadh, to scrutinise the boundaries of a locality you believed you knew well and explore the interconnection of everything that sits on a grocery shelf.[2]

[1] Romania has one of the largest diasporas of workers in the EU, with millions of citizens working abroad, particularly in the fields of agriculture, construction and care work.

[2] These are some of places where Elia's collective workshop *Reading Palm* took place since 2022.

Without even realising, I had started an inventory. Corn puffs (pufuleți), a salty snack made from corn grits and a childhood classic in communist times; the affordable and ubiquitous mini-pretzels (covrigei); the iconic Eugenia sandwich biscuit. They all include palm oil. It doesn't take much investigative work in a supermarket to unravel the illusion of pure locality these products are falsely bound to once you realise that their ingredients stretch far beyond national borders. As artist Simryn Gill has put it, palm oil, "after all, it's all around us here."[3] Once this recognition of palm oil's pervasiveness in recent history hits you upfront, how do artists reckon with it?

↑ Snacks containing palm oil in Romania. Image courtesy of author.

↓ Elia Nurvista, *Long Hanging Fruits*. 2024, in the exhibition, *Like Leaves*, Salonul de Proiecte, Bucharest. Image courtesy of Ştefan Sava.

[3] Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, *Becoming Palm* (Sternberg Press; NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 7.

The workshop in Bucharest was an integral part of Elia's *Long Hanging Fruits*, a project that has been evolving and travelling since 2020. In the foreground of a mural that defines the space of the gathering, participants came together for what the artist aptly called, in a playful pun, a "reading palm" collective workshop. The interpretation of lines, undulations and mounts applies here to a layered landscape of terraced fields, winding roads and palm trees depicted on the wall in warm tones of orange and yellow. At the top of the composition, like a raised mount on a human palm, a menacing excavator reigns, dominating both the view and, quite literally, the land. We were all invited to become palm readers and to decipher our collective fate under the threatening steel arm of an excavator. To step into the so-called realm of the occult or the magical may be a surprisingly fitting method of understanding the history of palm oil. This approach echoed Max Haiven's argument in *Palm Oil: The Grease of Empire*, from which a telling excerpt—*Whose surplus?*—is offered by Elia to the palm readers for collective discussion.[4]

↓ First *Oil Palm Reading* collective workshop took place in Maastricht in the artist's studio during a fellowship at Jan van Eyck Academie, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

While capitalism prides itself on rationality, Haiven argues that its operations are not so different from the very forms of superstition, fetishism, or ritual it claims to transcend or disenchant us from. On the contrary, within this system, acts presented as rational often lead to concealed irrational outcomes. Haiven situates the history of palm oil within the distinct cosmology of capitalism, one steered by the divine status of the free market, whose fetishised existence relies on what he defines as "sacrificial acts" committed by imperial powers. The British Benin Expedition of 1897 serves in his book as an agonising illustration of the sacrificial cosmology of the market. Haiven interprets the British invasion that devastated the Edo Kingdom as a symbolic case study on how the history of palm oil is inseparable from the mass sacrifice of multispecies in the service of racial capitalism and empire. This expedition was

[4] Max Haiven, *Palm Oil: The Grease of Empire* (Pluto Press, 2022), 98–114.

framed by the British to the public from the metropole as a civilising mission, launched in retaliation against the natives, whom they called "barbarians," for the killing of British officials, despite the fact that the British were the ones who had entered the territory against the King Oba of Benin's wishes. In reality, the expedition was a calculated act of imperial aggression that violently dismantled local control over resources, paving the way for British dominance in West African trade networks, including the palm oil trade.

And since the 19th century, the oil palm economy has been embedded in a globalised economy of sacrifice, one in which human and more-than-human lives are financialised, devalued and rendered surplus:

> An increase in demand for snack food in India triggers a chain of market decisions that see the forced displacement of an Indigenous community in West Papua and, with it, the liquidation of their entire lifeway and cosmology.[5]

And as painful as it is to write in current times, we witness how today's global politics, from the economy of the palm to the economy of war, demand more and more sacrifice.

Suppose the oil palm plantation relies on the inseparability between profit and sacrifice. In that case, it equally depends on another form of inseparability, namely the interconnection between the migration of people and the migration of plant life and other species within the Plantationocene.[6] Captured in the process of site clearance, Elia's landscape is emblematic of what the concept of Plantationocene implicates. The radical simplification of the landscape, rendered almost devoid of life, visually performs what makes a plantation: a system in which plants and animals are abstracted to become resources.[7] Where are all the critters? A palpable sense of absence lingers over this meticulously ordered terrain, where the only sign of life is one of discipline evoked by the tamed palms, standing in distinct formation, as in any plantation. It is no surprise that in another of Elia's works, and in a similarly playful gesture, hundreds of scaled-down palm trees made in ceramic are given feet: not merely are they poised to move, but they are already in motion, displaced, relocated, again and again. This choreography recalls another aspect of the plantation system: the relentless relocation of plants and animals.[8] The African oil palm species,

[5] Haiven, *Palm Oil*: *The Grease of Empire*, 119.

[6] The term *Plantationocene* was introduced by scholars Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing and several peer scientists during a 2014 conversation at Aarhus University as part of the Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene project. An edited transcript was published in the *Ethnos* journal in 2015. The concept was proffered as a critique of the Anthropocene for fetishising human agency and peddling a Eurocentric narrative of climate change rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Instead, *Plantationocene* foregrounds the long history of plantation systems and the ways in which they transformed the landscape and labour, laying the foundation for our current environmental crisis.
See Donna Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene,"
Ethnos 81, no. 3 (2016): 535–564,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838.

[7] Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking," 556.

[8] Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking," 557.

Elaeis guineensis, was transported from West Africa to Southeast Asia as part of a Dutch colonial mission in the mid-19th century. This species formed the basis of the plantation industry in Southeast Asia and became the first major cash crop, which is defined as a crop produced for commercial gain instead of use by the grower.[9]

The expansion of cash crop plantations in present-day Malaysia and Indonesia led to the migration of thousands of workers, particularly from South Asia, whose indentured labour under colonial regimes made industrial plantations possible. Ironically, as Max Haiven points out, in more recent times, it is the instant ramen-style noodles, offering roughly 400 calories of refined white wheat flour and palm oil, that have become a staple food for migrant workforces across the globe.[10] He gives the example of China, where workers were relocated from rural areas to newly built industrial cities that became the workshop of the world, and how the caloric fuel of these instant noodles sustained them. As if to insist on the realisation that we live in a world fuelled by instant noodles and made of palm oil, Elia's work engages the palm not only as a subject matter but also as an artistic material, incorporated into different forms of artmaking, from object to social practice. Returning to her mural, one key aspect stands out: the depiction of a palm plantation is made with unrefined palm oil mixed with pigments. The landscape is rendered visible through the very subject it depicts. During the *Reading Palm* session, participants do not merely discuss the current realities of the palm oil industry; they serve and eat it together, engaging in a full body-mind experience that blurs the boundary between reflection and alimentation. Palm oil is inescapable; we live with it, we think through it.

In a memorable book on Indonesia's environmental movements, logging and plantation economies in Kalimantan, anthropologist Anna Tsing introduced the concept of friction as a zone where local cultures negotiate, repurpose and resist the universalising forces of capitalism, such as development and resource extraction.[11] Responding to global studies discourse, Tsing insists that capitalism does not spread seamlessly but rather unfolds through messy, contingent and awkward interactions with local worlds. The concept of friction provides a compelling lens to understand the unpredictable outcomes of the relocations that have defined the Plantationocene. While the Dutch smuggled oil palm seeds from West Africa to Java, they also introduced Javanese batik techniques to West Africa. There, these wax-resist dyeing methods were retransformed by local artisans into what we know as African wax print textiles, a hybrid product at the intersection of Indonesian craft, African culture and Dutch colonial trade.

Elia's textile work *The Route,* part of *Long Hanging Fruits* series, revisits this entangled history. Four large batik panels narrate the intertwined trajectories of palm oil and wax print textiles through storyboard-like compositions depicting plantation workers, transoceanic journeys and wax-dyeing labourers. The vivid yellows and oranges evoke the palm oil landscape, highlighting a shared material culture while asserting a renewed sense of agency, appropriating and repurposing commercial materials to

[9] Four African oil palm seedlings that formed the basis of the plantation industry in Southeast Asia were first planted in the Botanic Gardens in Bogor, Java. Ian E. Henson, "A Brief History of the Oil Palm," in *Palm Oil: Production, Processing, Characterization, and Uses*, ed. Oi-Ming Lai, Chin-Ping Tan, and Casimir C. Akoh (AOCS Press, 2012), 9, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-9818936-9-3.50004-6.

[10] Haiven, *Palm Oil*, 104.

[11] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

retell colonial histories and their lingering legacies. Elia's new sculpture series, *Bodies of Penumbra: The Soft Machinery of Light*, commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum, amplifies this zone of friction. Woven palm fronds, materials typically discarded as waste, and wax derived from palm oil are repurposed and transformed into sculptures that evoke the lived realities of plantation workers, yet through a sense of theatricality reminiscent of Western Baroque aesthetics. As the works illustrate, the interactions of cultures within the space of friction can be awkward and unforeseen. Yet the sculptures recall the agency and imagination of those who negotiate creatively and politically, on the ground daily, with the overpowering force of capital. I'm reminded of the story of a billiard table, shared by Simryn Gill in *Becoming Palm*. It was left behind by the British in a former rubber estate in Malaysia and, years later, repurposed into a temple by the descendants of Tamil indentured labourers.[12] Such acts, whether transforming waste into a fragile monument dedicated to workers or converting a colonial relic of leisure into a sacred space, signal the enduring capacity of migrant labourers to reclaim, reinvent and inscribe meaning within systems designed to subordinate them. In these gestures, agency emerges not merely as a strategy for survival but as a creative force for imagining and asserting a more dignified existence.

↓ Elia Nurvista, *The Route* and palm sculptures in the exhibition *Eight Degrees: Contemporary Art on the Forest*, 2024, Bildmuseet, Umeå University. Photograph by Mikael Lundgren.

[12] Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 20–21.

Several months after the exhibition that hosted Elia's mural and the collective palm reading, a Bangladeshi delivery worker was violently assaulted on the streets of Bucharest in a deliberate xenophobic attack.[13] This hostility is not incidental but actively fed by Romania's far-right nationalist party, whose rhetoric echoes a localised version of Trumpism.[14] The irony is painful; it shatters not only the hope for a transnational solidarity but even the faintest glimpse of empathy. Narratives of migrants as threats to cultural identity and to the economic security of national citizens, whether in Eastern Europe or elsewhere, have become increasingly common ways to vilify migrant workers. Inducing fear regarding job theft, cultural erosion and social incompatibility not only stigmatises migrants but also creates divisions within the working class. This popular discourse reveals deeper societal failures: our inability to reckon with a search for a dignified life amid the hardships of migration.

Elia's artworks highlight the global origins of everyday products we consume and how cultures inevitably contaminate one another. Perhaps that cup of instant noodles saturated by palm oil that we all metabolise can be a reminder of connections across difference.

[13] Tiberiu Stoichici, "Is racism taking root in Romania?," IN FOCUS, accessed October 29, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/go-back-to-your-country-is-racism-taking-root-in-romania/video-73921080.
The incident, filmed by the perpetrator and widely circulated online, made visible the growing hostility towards the new wave of migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, many of whom are employed in the service and construction industries.

[14] A few days before the act of aggression, a party leader publicly urged Romanians to reject services provided by non-European workers, portraying them as threats to the cultural identity and economic security of citizens of the nation.

↗ Elia Nurvista, *Palm Reading*. 2023. KfW stiftung. Photograph by G.Feirman.

↖ **Elia Nurvista. ‘The Route.’ 4 pieces (each 300 × 150 cm) batik technique on cotton fabric. ‘The Map.’ 600 × 80 cm, hand embroidery on woven textile. ‘The day by day’ 5 pieces (each 300 × 150) hand embroidery and unrefined palm oil dye on fabric. 2024. Photograph by Rick Mandoeng. Courtesy of WereldMuseum.**

Artist Biographies

Bagus Pandega is an artist based in Bandung whose practice interrogates Indonesia's ecological and socio-political conditions. He incorporates elements such as programming, industrial machines, sound systems, and plant biofeedback into immersive kinetic systems. Through this dynamic interplay, Bagus reveals the entangled legacy of Indonesia's colonial history and its abundant natural resources, highlighting how extractive economies have shaped both landscapes and lives. His installations not only trace the scars of environmental degradation but also give voice to the lived realities of communities across Indonesia, surfacing the tensions between technological progress, capitalism, industrialisation, and human existence.

Bagus received his Bachelor of Arts in Sculpture in 2008 and his Master of Fine Arts in 2015 from the Faculty of Art and Design at Institut Teknologi Bandung. Recent notable exhibitions include solo presentations, *Daya Benda* (2025) at Swiss Institute, New York and *Sumber Alam* (2025) at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, WAGIWAGI (2022) at Documenta 15 in Kassel, Germany, and the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial (2021–22) at QAGOMA in Brisbane, Australia.

Elia Nurvista is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice scrutinises the politics of food, exploring its relationship with the power dynamics and socio-economic inequalities in this world. Utilising a wide range of media, including sculpture, batik, performance art and video installations, she engages with the social implications of the food system to critically address wider issues such as ecology, gender, class and geopolitics. In 2015, Nurvista initiated Bakudapan, a study group collective that undertakes community and research projects on food's broader role within culture. She is also part of Struggles for Sovereignty: Land, Water, Farming, Food, a collective platform that aims to build lasting solidarity between Indonesian and international groups who are engaged in struggles for the right to self-determination over basic resources.

Elia was awarded the 2025 Villa Roman Prize. Recent exhibitions include Diriyah Biennale, Saudi Arabia (2024); Sharjah Biennial (2023), UAE; Karachi Biennale, Pakistan (2019); and the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at QAGOMA, Australia (2018), amongst many others. She has exhibited widely in group and solo exhibitions around the world.

Contributor Biographies

June Yap is Director of Curatorial and Research at the Singapore Art Museum. Exhibitions she has curated at SAM include: *Heman Chong: This is a dynamic list and may never be able to satisfy particular standards for completeness* (2025); *Yee I-Lann: Mansau-Ansau* (2024); the Singapore Biennale 2022 named *Natasha*; *The Gift* (2021) for the curatorial collaboration Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories; *They Do Not Understand Each Other* (2020) presented at Tai Kwun Contemporary. She is the author of *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (2016).

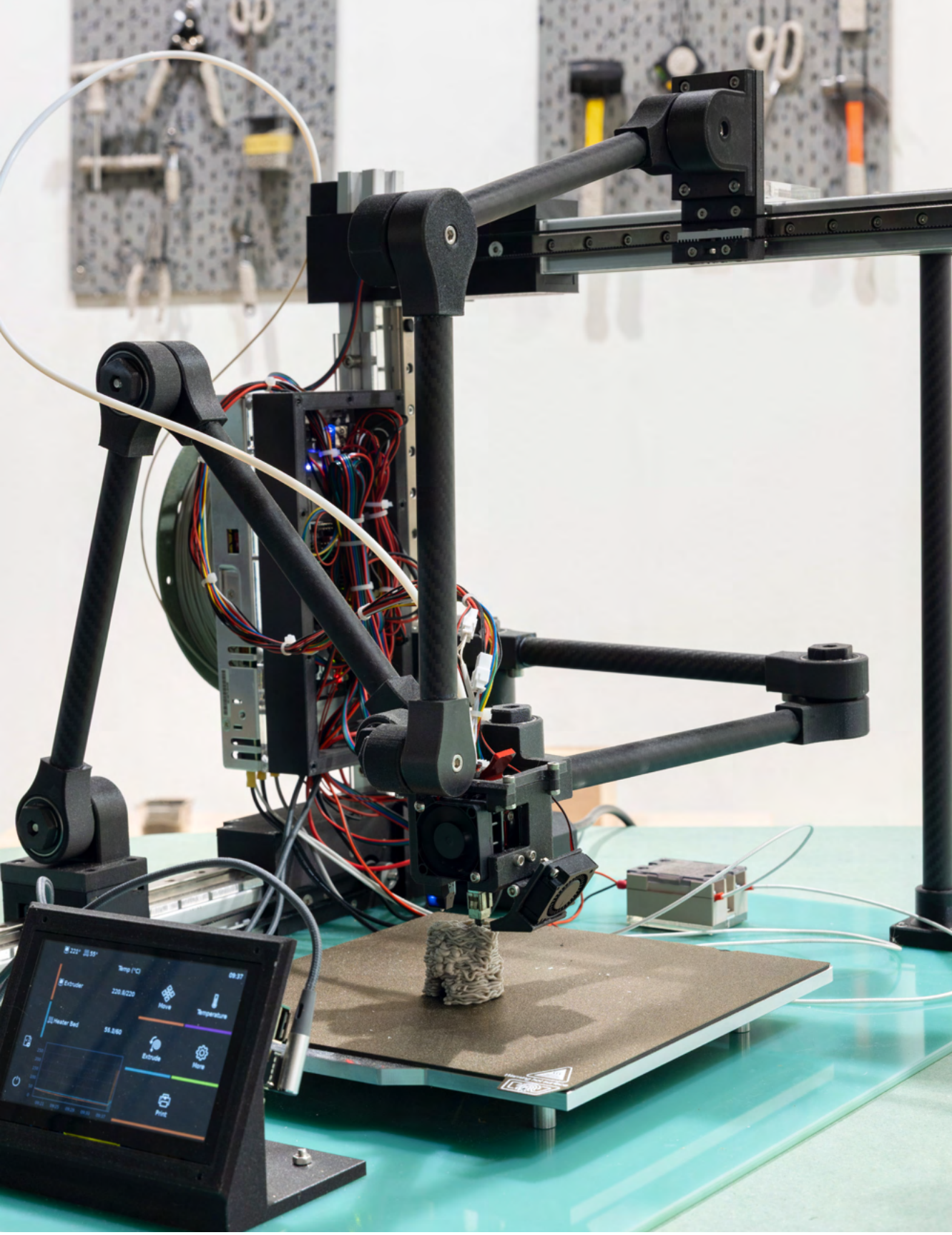
Syaheedah Iskandar is Assistant Curator at Singapore Art Museum. She works with vernacular ways of seeing, thinking and being. Drawing on Southeast Asia's visual culture(s), her research explores entanglements between the unseen and the hypervisual, and their translations across material and new media practices. Since joining the museum, she has worked on several projects, including SAM Fellowship with Shooshie Sulaiman, *Building a 'non-institution' institution* (2024-2025), *SAM Contemporaries* (2025 & 2023 editions), Nguyen Trinh Thi's *47 Days, Sound-less* (2024), Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* (2022-2024) and the first Material Intelligence edition, Korakrit Arunanondchai's *A Machine Boosting Energy into the Universe* (2022). Syaheedah was the inaugural Emerging Writers' Fellow for *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* (2019) and received the IMPART Award 2020 (Singapore) for her curatorial work. She holds an MA in History of Art and Archaeology from SOAS, University of London.

Anca Rujoiu is a curator and editor with over fifteen years of international experience in contemporary art across Europe and the Asia-Pacific. She is currently Curator of Exhibitions at Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Sweden. Rujoiu was part of the curatorial team for the 2nd Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale (2023–24) and co-curated the 2019 Art Encounters Biennial in Timișoara, Romania. From 2013 to 2018, she was a founding member of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, serving as Curator and later Head of Publications. She was also part of the curatorial initiative FormContent (2011–13), London, United Kingdom. She has co-edited numerous publications and artist books.

Brigitta Isabella engages with people, objects, and discourses across various platforms of knowledge production situated at the intersection of art history, critical theory and activism. She is a member of KUNCI Study Forum and Collective in Yogyakarta and part of the translocal editorial collective of the journal *Southeast of Now: New Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art*. Brigitta has edited several books, including *Unjuk Rasa: Art, Performativity, Activism* (Kelola, 2018), *Mengasah Asuh: Migrant Mother-Workers, Care Work, and Revolutionary Love* (Beranda Perempuan Migran, 2023), and *Beribu Surat: Anthology of Feminist Letters from Indonesia* (with Shinta Febriany, Peretas, 2024). She currently teaches at the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Yogyakarta.

Martin Germann is an exhibition maker and author, dividing his time between Belgium, Germany and Japan. He served as adjunct curator at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo until 2025, and from 2012 to 2019, he headed the artistic department of S.M.A.K., the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Belgium. Earlier in his career, he was a curator at the Kestner Gesellschaft Hannover (2008–2012) and worked for the 3rd and 4th Berlin Biennale (2003–2006). He received an AICA award for best exhibition in Belgium in 2016 for *Lili Dujourie: Folds in Time*.

↖ Bagus Pandega. *L.O.O.P. (Loss Overgrown Organic Pulse)*. 2025. Photograph by Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.



↗ Bagus Pandega. *Fabric of the Earth*. 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and ROH Projects. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti.

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About Singapore Art Museum
Singapore Art Museum opened in 1996 as the first art museum in Singapore. Also known as SAM, we present contemporary art from a Southeast Asian perspective for artists, art lovers and the art curious in multiple venues across the island, including a new venue in the historic port area of Tanjong Pagar.

SAM is building one of the world's most important public collections of Southeast Asian contemporary art, with the aim of connecting the art and the artists to the public and future generations through exhibitions and programmes.

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↖ Elia Nurvista, *Plantation Tragedy*, storyboard. 2026. Illustrations and image courtesy of Arda Awigarda.

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