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Postal address  
PO Box 9500  
2300 RA Leiden  
The Netherlands

Visitors  
Herta Mohr Building  
Witte Singel 27A  
2311 BG Leiden  
T +31 (0) 71-527 2227  
[iias@iias.nl](mailto:iias@iias.nl)

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Chief editor:  
Paramita Paul

Assistant editor:  
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Editor for The Network:  
Sandra Dehue

Digital editor:  
Thomas Voorter

Graphic Design:  
Paul Oram  
Lava

Printing:  
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Submission enquiries  
[thenewsletter@iias.nl](mailto:thenewsletter@iias.nl)  
More information:  
[iias.asia/the-newsletter](http://iias.asia/the-newsletter)

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# After Surabaya

Philippe Peycam



**T**he dust has now settled after the considerable event of the 13th edition of ICAS in Surabaya, the first held in person after COVID, and the first organized as a Conference-Festival or “ConFest.” From accounts of all the people I talked to, and in my own judgement, I can say that it was an unprecedented success.

Given the scale and complexity of the event – both a conference and a festival intricately woven into the fabric of the city – it is of course difficult to draw hasty conclusions, especially from the perspective of one of the two main co-organizers, without yet having an opportunity to discuss the matter among our colleagues within IIAS, within AIIOC-UNAIR, our main local partners, and between our two organizations. All I can say at this stage is that ICAS Surabaya 2024 marked an important moment in the process of internationalization of Indonesia’s humanistic, academic, inter-cultural scholarship, and in the process of decentering knowledge generation and exchanges away from the more traditional ‘centers’ of Jakarta and Yogyakarta.

It was also an event in which a major city, Surabaya, displayed the full body of its human and cultural resources, from the engagement of its civil society and communities to the depth of its history, along with its modern infrastructures, as the maritime gateway to Eastern Indonesia. The country, no doubt, is undergoing major transformations as far as its academic and cultural landscapes are concerned, and these are developments that reflect its newly assertive position in the global economic and geopolitical landscape. It was telling that the de facto Minister of Culture, the historian HE Hilmar Farid, chose to spend two full days of his busy schedule participating in numerous discussions held at the ConFest, and to have his ministry actively support the whole event.

The diversity of participants, in terms of their academic and cultural backgrounds, was also unprecedented. More than 80 nationalities were represented and, within Indonesia, participants from every corner of the archipelagic nation joined. The 10 broad thematic clusters, articulated in both global and local terms, also fostered a remarkable array of perspectives. They made sure that the event, however global and pan-Asian it was, was also in dialogue with the Eastern Javanese and Indonesian experiences.

There were also the numerous exhibitions, in-situ workshops, public displays, and performances scattered across the city’s historical center, intellectual and creative gestures no longer separated from the social fabric. All such events enchanted many discussions throughout the ConFest.

I, for instance, attended an in-situ public roundtable on “The Chinese of Surabaya” held in the community’s Ancestors Hall, located in the old Chinese quarter, an area free from commodification, in the heart of the old town. The experience was magical because the live testimonies that were shared with the public, and the discussions they triggered, were endowed with a unique resonance by occurring in this beautiful, solemn, yet also intimate space. That was just one in-situ event of the ConFest among many, many others.

My colleagues will present in this issue a more detailed account of what can be drawn from the ICAS Surabaya experience (see pp. 42-49). What I want to try here is to reflect on the impact we can begin to draw for IIAS.

First, one reflection that immediately emerged from the ICAS Surabaya experience has to do with the contrast that continues to exist between the actual capacities and organizational setting of IIAS as a middle-size institute and the magnitude of an event like ICAS. I also want to return to IIAS’ multi-functional approach, and how it could set a new structural, programmatic laboratory for advancing internationalization strategies.

What is clear is how the ICAS Surabaya ConFest was endowed with a multi-leveled, transformative, accelerating capacity that has affected many partners: it helped in the strategic (re-)positioning of Airlangga University, at the national and international levels, but also vis-à-vis its surrounding communities; it exerted influence in the way the city’s municipality engaged with the revitalization of its historical zones, in the recognition of the local artist-activists and their capacity to impact positively on both the city and the university; and it helped in the way new intellectual trends and networks, new epistemologies, can be developed, beyond geographies or disciplinary boundaries.

This multifaceted transformative aspect of ICAS could be implemented largely thanks to the mobilization of IIAS’ pluri-functional capacities, and thanks to the institute’s ability to leverage innovative dynamics in

Fig.1: ICAS 13 banner in Surabaya, 2024.

collaboration with both larger and local partners, adapting to diverse working styles and cultures.

This was quite a remarkable feat, not only for the accumulated logistical and organizational experience built on 12 previous ICAS events, but also because of the dedicated involvement of the institute’s team to innovate on multiple aspects of the program, from the definition of activities and new formats to their final implementation.

Moreover, while from the outside the Surabaya ConFest may have appeared to be just a few days’ event, the whole exercise, from its inception to its conclusion actually transcends that limited timeline. It has paved the way for numerous long-lasting initiatives and has acted as a catalyst for new partnerships, serving as a crucial meeting point for new collaborative networks to take shape. Additionally, the preparation process presented an opportunity for Airlangga University to effectively engage in a collaborative work process: beyond its campus, with local communities and artists; beyond its regional and national frameworks; beyond its traditional operational boundaries.

The process of transformation of ICAS from an academic conference to an academic-civic-artistic ConFest thus allowed us to innovate in seeking to bridge different people and institutional actors, with their distinct backgrounds and ranges of intervention, thereby embracing more sectors of knowledge, more knowledge ecosystems.

The ConFest certainly benefited from IIAS’s diverse portfolio of engagements, itself built on the institute’s different priorities. It was them, along with many others, that helped lift the event both in its scale and its capacity to deliver a uniquely meaningful and innovative space of exchange, one in which a number of micro-events – long planned and developed by colleagues together with their Indonesian and international partners – brought in groundbreaking new contributions and connections.

I could list the projects presented under the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) initiative or those under IIAS’ Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), or again, those activities framed within our new South-South-North platform. I was involved in one of them entitled “Inclusive Southeast Asia” that sought to bring together representatives of ‘remote’ or ‘marginal’ institutions of the region, from Aceh to the Moluccas, from West Papua to Laos, from Timor Leste to forced-exiled Myanmar. Interestingly enough, this session attracted participants from Africa and Latin America as well. A similar type of intricate, new form of interaction occurred when a Nigerian artist worked alongside their Chinese and Indonesian counterparts, artists and academics, to improvise joint performances and plan future collaborations.

In the end, this diversity in perspectives, along with the aim to integrate research, education, dissemination, and archiving, brings me back to a point I have emphasized in previous Notes: the strength of IIAS’ multifunctional approach. Combined with discussions on the institute’s organizational structure and scale, this multi-faceted platform-structure can offer new opportunities for an innovative university-wide strategy in international collaboration and profile building.

One of IIAS’ current ambitions is to expand some of its innovative programs, such as the ConFest model, beyond their initial limited geographic focus on Asia. By doing so, we aim to support our university of affiliation, Leiden University, and the broader Leiden-Delft-Erasmus collaborative platform, in developing groundbreaking activities that could strengthen their engagement as local-global knowledge and civic actors.

Philippe Peycam is Director at IIAS.  
Email: [p.m.f.peycam@iias.nl](mailto:p.m.f.peycam@iias.nl)