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Q! Film Festival as Cultural Activism: Strategic Cinephilia and the Expansion of a Queer Counterpublic

Intan Paramaditha

This article examines the gay and lesbian Q! Film Festival in Indonesia as a form of cultural activism. I build on Michael Warner’s work to situate the Q! Film Festival as a counterpublic, but argue that QFF’s strategy and tactic, in de Certeau’s terms, demand that we think beyond the oppositional position as a salient feature of a counterpublic. QFF deployed what I call “strategic cinephilia” to assert itself as a legitimate unit in the urban middle-class public culture, expanding its public address and thus destabilizing the notion of oppositionality. I also demonstrate that the recent emergence of religious conservatism has forced QFF to reconfigure its position and find new tactics to negotiate with the confining spaces.

A QUEER FILM FESTIVAL

On an October evening in 2011, I walked through a dark narrow alley to a secluded auditorium within the Indonesian National Library complex, in Jakarta. This was where the 10th Q! Film Festival (QFF) was held. The small flat-floored auditorium, with its modest uncomfortable chairs and its stiff, bureaucratic aura, seemed to be an unlikely place for what was known to be one of the largest gay and lesbian film festivals in Asia. In previous years the festival was much more vibrant, taking place at foreign cultural institutions or mainstream movie theaters and generating much publicity from the local and national press. In its 10th anniversary however the festival turned into a secret party. The opening was restricted to “invitations only.” Regular audience members had to register as festival members and receive a password in order to gain access to the screening schedules on the QFF website.

The transformation of the Q! Film Festival from a lively, urban celebration into a clandestine event resulted from the prior protest launched by the vigilante

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group Islam Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam/FPI). In 2010 its members, with their recognizable Arab-style white robes, gathered outside the Goethe Institut Jakarta. Condemning QFF for promoting homosexuality and damaging the morality of the young generation with its “Western” values, FPI demanded the festival be closed. After that protest the organizers insisted that QFF must continue, but decided to be more cautious and low key. Indonesia’s political atmosphere in general was not amicable to sexual minorities, as intolerance by religious conservatives was worsening.

The case of QFF testifies to the repercussions of the democratization process after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. The political reform (*reformasi*) opened up avenues for voices and public performances of groups previously marginalized under Suharto’s rule. Q! Film Festival is part of new independent cultural initiatives shaped by the spirit of “freedom of expression,” the desire to express new political identities, and transformations in media environment in the post-authoritarian period. On the other hand, the freer political climate has allowed for more visible and diverse expressions of Islam, including vigilante groups such as FPI, which have protested and attacked events and places deemed morally corrupt by them.

While QFF is currently facing the challenge of resituating itself in public following the FPI protest, it is important to value a decade of its contributions to an urban middle-class public culture present in the country during the 2000s. Building on Michael Warner’s work, this article aims to document and analyze the roles of QFF in reshaping and expanding a queer counterpublic in Indonesia. I argue here that QFF’s strategy and tactics in their cultural activism, shaped by their embeddedness in a larger urban middle-class public, require us to think beyond Warner’s notion of oppositionality. My arguments are developed based on a body of research, combining media analysis and ethnographic methods of interviews and participant observation, which I conducted mainly in Jakarta between 2011 and 2013. Analyses and reflections presented in this article are largely informed by my multiple position as both a researcher who, at that time, was based in the United States and an Indonesian writer and cultural activist who maintains affinity to the Q! Film Festival and the artistic public that it belongs to.

This article has several parts. First, I situate Q! Film Festival within the landscape of post-Suharto cultural activism. While linking QFF to other independent cultural initiatives in Indonesia in terms of modes of production, I will try to put QFF in the context of competing publics that resulted from post-Suharto sociopolitical transformations. Next, I trace the history of queer counterpublics in Indonesia in order to rethink Warner’s conception of a counterpublic. I will demonstrate that, unlike the queer counterpublics in the Suharto period, the Q! Film Festival provides a different model that complicates the oppositional position as a salient feature of a counterpublic. Using de Certeau’s notion of strategy and tactics, I will further argue that QFF deploys what I call “strategic cinephilia” to claim legitimacy as part of middle-class public culture. At the end of this article I reflect on QFF’s clandestine mode after the FPI protest, as a new tactic that limits publicness but reconfigures oppositional articulations.

CULTURAL ACTIVISM AND THE PUBLICS IN POST-AUTHORITARIAN INDONESIA

The birth of the QFF should be situated within the context of the flourishing independent cultural initiatives in post-authoritarian Indonesia. After the demise of the “New Order” authoritarian regime under President Suharto, in 1998, democratization processes have prompted new ideas, feelings, discourses and exchanges of keywords such as transition, openness, and freedom of expression. The urban historian Abidin Kusno argues that Indonesia’s *Reformasi* (reform) has created a sense of “looseness in the center,” a pervasive feeling in the society when everything associated with the “center”—the state, the capital city, and the formal spaces facilitated by the government—has ceased to be the main source of authority [2010: 5]. National cohesiveness is challenged by the emergence of new “centers.” Decentralization has produced disorientation about authority among citizens, but at the same time it has also evoked a desire among citizens to find new spaces for experimentation. A “sense of looseness” exists simultaneously with a sense of being on the frontier, as opportunities to create new spaces are suddenly opening up. In the cultural sphere new communities in arts, literature, theater and film emerged with the spirit of countering the old (formal and centralized) spaces. These communities explored new modes of production and consumption without relying on the support from the state, which was regarded as one of the major funding sources for the arts in the past.

In the film scene, several independent communities have fostered new filmmakers, programmers and networkers. They include Forum Lenteng, KONFIDEN (Independent Film Community), Boemboe, Ragam, Jaringan Kerja Film Banyumas (Banyumas Film Network) and Q! Film Festival. These groups share similar characteristics: they were initiated in the early 2000s by young people as alternative spaces. “Alternative” here means a challenge to formal and regulated spaces,¹ including the monopoly of the 21 cineplex systems or bureaucratic film institutions inherited by the New Order state. Some of these organizations receive support from international funding networks such as HIVOS (Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking) or the Ford Foundation, which have indirectly shaped the direction of their practices. In general however they started with their own funding. With the lack of attention and financial support from the state, the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) model became a prevalent mode of production. Film communities and organizations create their own festival, film archives, websites and journals with a spirit of DIY knowledge dissemination. The DIY ethos for many collectives means gaining and sharing knowledge through any possible means, including illegal downloading and accessing of pirated films.

These independent communities, including Q! Film Festival, indicate that the post-Suharto cultural landscape is characterized by various forms of what Faye Ginsburg has called “cultural activism,” in which “cultural material is used and strategically deployed as a part of a broader project of political empowerment” [2008: 299]. By inventing their own modes of cultural production, young people invent new spaces to allow the formation of new political identities and circulate discourses that were not favored by institutions funded by the state or profit-oriented corporations. The DIY ethos becomes an essential part of cultural activism.

While the *Reformasi* spirit serves as an important shaping factor, one could also argue that the DIY mode of production characterizes the emergence of cultural initiatives across Southeast Asia since the late 1990s through the early 2000s. New independent art communities and film culture in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia similarly depend on the development of new media technology, low budget production, and the DIY culture to articulate new identities and concerns.²

The new dynamics in the arts and culture scene, however, does not yield a complete picture of post-Suharto Indonesia. We need to trace another direction of *Reformasi* in order to situate Q! Film Festival in a larger sociopolitical context. As a response to Suharto's suppression of Islam, Islamic resurgence has become indispensable for the trajectories of democratization. The Suharto regime contained Islam carefully, limiting it to the realm of personal piety and allowing only one Islamic political party as an umbrella for a wide array of Islamic voices and ideologies. In the post-Suharto period the rise of new Muslim political parties is constantly promoting the roles of Islam in public. The post-Suharto Islamic resurgence paved the way for new changes that could be categorized into three areas: (1) ongoing attempts to incorporate Islamic law into the state; (2) new ways of performing piety at the cultural and social levels, often linked with Muslim consumer culture; (3) the rise of militant groups. These three areas involve different actors who might not necessarily agree with each other, but the strong visibility of each area constitutes a new political and cultural climate in which Islam is increasingly adapted as *the* post-authoritarian national identity. For instance, the Islamist party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party/PKS) have successfully pushed the government to implement *shariah* law in some provinces and pass the Pornography Law. At the grassroots level, militant groups such as Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) conduct protests or attacks against groups deemed as deviant (e.g., the Muslim Ahmadiyah group, artists, LGBT communities), all in the name of morality.

Indonesia's *reformasi* hence serves as a stage of competing publics, with each public asserting its own vision of the post-authoritarian nation and citizenship in an age of democratization. On the one hand, it is characterized by the emergence of new cultural initiatives as well as new filmmakers, artists and writers who interrogate gender and sexuality; yet on the other hand conservative policies framed within a religious perspective are constantly being produced. With the stronger presence of Islam in laws, institutions and daily lives, the experience of public life in the country with its Muslim majority enters a new level. Although the friction between Islamic traditions, such as between the scriptural and the pluralist Muslims, exists and challenges the idea of a monolithic Muslim public, in general conservative values have become more dominant and understood as representing *the* public.

QUEER COUNTERPUBLICS: FROM LAMBDA INDONESIA TO Q! FILM FESTIVAL

As with other forms of new cultural initiative, the Q! Film Festival emerged as an alternative local community event; it is urban-based (in Jakarta) and was

conceived with a strong DIY spirit. Q-Munity, the festival organizers, tried to achieve two goals. The first, advertised publicly on their website and press release, was to promote “good quality films.” The second one, expressed more implicitly during the first years of the festival, was to create a social space for gays and lesbians outside the conventional meeting spaces such as chat rooms or bars marked as queer. The latter aim shows that Q-Munity nurtured and contributed to what Michael Warner calls “a queer counterpublic” [2002].

The Habermasian universal public sphere, a social arena that allows “private people [to] come together as a public” and engage in rational debates [1989: 27], has been criticized for excluding women and other marginalized groups and thus reflecting a domination of the male bourgeois public sphere. Emerging from inequalities, marginalized groups form their own public spheres as alternatives to the dominant one. Nancy Fraser calls these social spheres “subaltern counterpublics,” defining them as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” [1990: 122]. Warner builds on and criticizes the notion of subaltern counterpublics, arguing that Fraser’s description of the counterpublics is still centered on the Habermasian rational-critical publics but “with the word ‘oppositional’ inserted” [2002: 118].

Warner’s conception of a counterpublic is useful in two ways in my analysis of queer counterpublics in Indonesia. First, in questioning Fraser’s use of the word “subaltern,” Warner argues that some groups are counterpublics but not necessarily subalterns. Queer counterpublics in Indonesia are marginalized by the dominant heteronormative values, but often their members are privileged individuals who do not inhabit a subaltern social position. Secondly, Warner’s stronger emphasis on oppositionality as a defining characteristic of a counterpublic serves as both a productive tool of analysis and a troubling notion to complicate. Warner reminds us that a counterpublic “is not merely a different or an alternative idiom” [*ibid.*: 120]; a public can be a sub-public offering an alternative interest in its particularities, but a marginalized position and friction against the dominant public are essential parts of a counterpublic’s consciousness. The relation between public and counterpublic, according to Warner, is defined by a “conflictual relation” [*ibid.*: 118].

A conflict with the dominant cultural norms marked the formation of a queer counterpublic in Indonesia. However, the cultural practices of the Q! Film Festival require us to rethink Warner’s notion of oppositionality. Before I further elaborate my arguments on QFF, I will first demonstrate that some of the most important initiatives to create a queer counterpublic had emerged during the Suharto period. One such initiative began with the newsletter, *Lambda Indonesia*, an initiative that set a precedent for the formation of QFF.

In August 1982 the activist Dede Oetomo and his colleagues published *Lambda Indonesia*, the first newsletter about gay life with a tagline “*gaya hidup ceria*” (a happy/gay lifestyle). The newsletter was created to respond to coverage of an unofficial wedding between two lesbian women in 1981 by the mainstream magazines *Tempo* and *Liberty*.³ Soon after articles on this wedding appeared, there came a number of letters in the psychology columns of major newspapers

and magazines, sent by individuals who were curious about non-normative sexuality and their own sexual identities. These letters received normative responses, such as “find a shrink” or “pray more,” urging Dede Oetomo and his friends to set up a P.O. box address in a number of media outlets to respond to such questions [1996].

In a period when homosexuality was largely pathologized by the mainstream media, Lambda Indonesia’s newsletter became the first Indonesian publication to provide support for sexual minorities by interrogating the heteronormative frameworks embedded in the society. It challenged the New Order gender ideology, which regarded the family as the smallest unit of the nation, consisting of a father as a leader and the mother as the supporter.⁴ Religion played a role in Indonesia’s notions about heteronormativity but its public articulations were less assertive than today. Between 1982 and 1984, although the newsletter drew much enthusiasm (receiving some 40 letters of support per week), it remained small and exclusive in scope. In contrast to the dominant mainstream magazines, the newsletter was aimed for “*kalangan sendiri*” (a closed community).

The relation between the mainstream media and Lambda Indonesia echoes Warner’s example as he conceptualizes the counterpublic. He describes the relation between the 18th-century publication *The Spectator* and She-Romps, a club of women that deviated from the dominant norms of sociability represented by *The Spectator* as an all-male bourgeois space. Just like She-Romps rejecting the conventions of politeness and modesty for women, Lambda refused to give the “find a shrink” and “pray more” sort of advice to its readers. As a counterpublic, Lambda Indonesia, in Warner’s words, “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one” [2002: 119].

The emergence of Lambda Indonesia as a counterpublic was inseparable from the global discourses of a gay rights movement that informed the cosmopolitan worldview of its founder, Dede Oetomo. Cosmopolitanism here refers to a vision that challenges confined ideas of national belonging, identity and citizenship. Anthony Kwame Appiah asserts that a cosmopolitan, despite its attachment to home and cultural particularities, embraces “the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” [1997: 612]. Earning his Ph.D. from Cornell University, Dede wrote that he was a part of gay activism in the United States during the 1970s: “Clearly the name Lambda Indonesia has the connotations of Stonewall, Gay Liberation and all that ... I was part of a campus gay group and so my concepts were very Western” [1996]. Dede’s cosmopolitanism was reflected in his double consciousness: he expressed his belonging to the U. S. gay rights movement on the one hand and, on the other, appropriated Western concepts to forge a local community that empowers sexual minorities back home. Dede started with Lambda as a small “closed community” and ended up establishing the national gay and lesbian organization, GAYa Nusantara, in the mid-1980s.

Q! Film Festival, on the contrary, emerged from a different social and political context. The idea for the QFF began in 2001, when a film programmer, John Badalu, after working for several successful film festivals in Jakarta, considered

organizing a special festival with a queer theme. His part-time job as a film reviewer for the *Jakarta Kini*, a magazine focusing on entertainment and lifestyle, put him in contact with other freelance writers and film reviewers such as Ve Handojo, Joko Anwar, Kenny Santana and Rizal Iwan. These young urban professionals, in their mid-20s and early 30s, decided to form Q-Munity and organized the first Q! Film Screening in 2002. At first the low-budget event looked amateurish, largely depending on the organizers' personal DVD and laser disc collections. Early support came from the Goethe Institut, where John worked as a project officer, but later more cultural centers joined Goethe in lending support to the festival. Within a few years QFF became the largest gay and lesbian film festival in Southeast Asia, affiliated with the Teddy Award Section of the Berlin Film Festival [Maimunah 2008].

The first Q! event drew 1,500 viewers in 2001, and in the following year the filmmaker and former film critic Joko Anwar wrote in *The Jakarta Post* that "Q-Munity decided to upgrade the event this year to an official film festival from a "guerilla" happening in 2002" [2003]. Q! gradually developed from a local community-based project to a potentially national event, reaching other cities in Java (Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya), Bali (Denpasar) and Sulawesi (Makassar). Its expansion at the national level coincided with John Badalu's transnational career. In 2003 he was sent by the Goethe Institut to take a German-language course in Berlin. Though he applied to volunteer at the Berlin Film Festival he ended up being asked to act as a jury member for the Teddy Awards, which focuses on gay and lesbian films. This unexpected offer came to him when the organizers found out that he was involved in the Q "guerilla happening" in 2002. In 2003, Q! Film Festival not only received licenses from the films' owners but also became host to the world premieres of two films. By 2008, the number of audience members had reached 9,000. The festival recruited more volunteers and held fringe events, including exhibitions, discussion forums, book launchings, and free HIV tests [Iwan 2012].

Like the *Lambda Indonesia* newsletter in the early 1980s, QFF was shaped by the global queer discourses. The name of the festival, "Q"—standing for "queer"—reflects the more cosmopolitan (and privileged) position of John and his friends, who have more knowledge and access to global queer culture as compared to many Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* (gays and lesbians).⁵ Indeed, Q-Munity popularized the term *queer* when people were more familiar with the terms *gay* and *lesbi*. At first the festival founders wanted to call the event "the Jakarta Gay and Lesbian Film Festival," but supporting foreign cultural centers expressed some disagreements and suggested that the festival founders change the name. They finally came up with "Queer Film Festival" but decided to shorten it into "Q" because "'Queer' is difficult to pronounce, and at that time a lot of people did not understand what it was. It still felt very foreign."⁶ John was aware that "queer" was an imported term and wanted to make sure that its foreignness would not create a barrier for the audience to connect with the festival.

By focusing on film screenings, he argues, QFF would provide an exposure to a variety of queer representations and create an alternative space outside the usual hangout places. At that time John observed that many LGBT people had no access to art-house and independent films: "People didn't know how to search

for gay and lesbian films. When we asked them to come to our festival, they asked, 'Are there such films? What do they look like? Are they porn films?'"⁷ A queer social space in the era where the internet was "a luxury," according to John, was limited, especially for gays who did not like going to the clubs. He recalled how meeting new gay friends was a challenge, because not everyone had a computer with personal internet access. "I myself still went to a *warnet* [internet café] in Sarinah. When I sent a message in the evening, I would get a reply the following day. So meeting people was really a hassle."⁸ This was affirmed by Joko Anwar, who recalled that prior to the Q! Film Festival the gay community had limited options other than "going to clubs or hanging around at malls or other places" [Wan 2007]. With QFF, LGBT people expanded their social relations. John further added: "Their circles are no longer limited to five friends. Before the film starts, people can meet others, chat, and become friends. It's a social event and it's a safe place for them to meet. Because at that time, if you didn't go to clubs, there were no other ways to meet people."⁹

The festival was perceived as an "empowering" event for the people involved, and it further opened up spaces for other queer affiliations. Commenting on the positive impact of the QFF on its volunteers, the filmmaker Joko Anwar said, "It gives them something to do, something positive, and I believe this kind of thing will empower them" [*ibid.*]. Most of these volunteers are young people, in high school or university, who have not come out yet. A freelance writer, Rizal Iwan, reflecting on how he was motivated by John in the early formation of Q! Film Festival, further links volunteering to accepting one's sexual identity: "A lot of them don't know that there are many people like them in the world, and by being involved they meet new people and others like them. It does good things for your self-acceptance" [*ibid.*]. Moreover, Q! Film Festival also fostered the birth of more gay organizations. A group of people who attended the festival decided to establish Arus Pelangi, an organization that promotes legal advocacy of LGBT people, in which John Badalu himself has served as a board member. Some people left Arus Pelangi and created Our Voice, an NGO that focuses on media literacy for the public by organizing lectures, film discussion, and workshops on journalism, video, and photography.¹⁰

For many gay and lesbian Indonesians, the function of QFF is similar to other gay and lesbian film festivals, which became more prominent in many different parts of the world in the 1990s. Demonstrating how 80-90 percent of the work shown at these festivals is never shown in other festivals, the queer cinema scholar B. Ruby Rich observes that a queer film festival is a world separated from the mainstream, offering "a space where diverse queer publics can come and frame their attendance as community" [2013: 37]. Rich creates a parallel between the queer film festival and pilgrimage: it strengthens pre-existing faith. As a "shared communion," the festival "reinforces the faith of the faithful, assures supplicants of their worthiness, creates a bond to carry individually into the larger world, and puts audiences back in touch with shared experiences and values" [*idem.*].

Q! Film Festival provided a space for a particular community outside the mainstream described by Rich; it facilitated a queer counterpublic for LGBT people in post-Suharto Indonesia. However, the difference between QFF and previous gay organizations, such as Dede Oetomo's Lambda Indonesia and GAYa Nusantara,

was its self-fashioning as a community of cinephiles that de-emphasized—at least in its early years—its commitment to gay activism. Although some gay communities and organizations had existed before, none had focused specifically on film nor exhibited a strong concern for film culture. The festival’s promotion materials often use queer visual idioms. For instance, a poster from the 2007 festival displays the film organizers in drag, celebrating both local and global references through a variety of costumes, from Indonesian *kebaya* (traditional dress for Javanese women) to Japanese *kimono*. Nonetheless, in making strategies of circulation, Q-Munity indicated a closer affiliation to the post-Suharto network of cultural activism instead of pre-existing LGBT organizations. The emphasis on cinephilia allowed the QFF organizers to expand its public address, and this is where a question around the “counter” in counterpublic emerges.

STRATEGIC CINEPHILIA: EXPANDING THE QUEER COUNTERPUBLIC

The circulatory space of a queer counterpublic, according to Warner, is freed from heteronormative speech in the ways in which it “addresses any participant as queer” [2002: 120]. As this at a certain point will encounter resistance, the speech of the queer counterpublic tends to circulate in “special, protected venues” or in “limited publications” [*idem*]. The “closed community” characteristics of Lambda Indonesia’s newsletter exemplify the limited venues of the queer counterpublic. In the case of QFF however film becomes a meeting-point between the queer community and an urban middle-class audience interested in arts and culture. As such, QFF has made the queer counterpublic more open and versatile.

While Warner acknowledges that “the expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier for a queer public” [*idem*], he does not delve into a discussion of diverse public strategies that members of a counterpublic deploy in order to strengthen their position. The practices, articulations, speech, styles are regulated by frictions, as Warner argues, “Frictions against the dominant public forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient to consciousness” [*idem*]. In the case of Lambda Indonesia, the oppositional discourse against heteronormativity helped the readers to connect themselves to others who were marginalized by the dominant discourse of the family in the New Order society. Q! Film Festival, on the other hand, raises a question of oppositionality when it downplays frictions and foregrounds cinephilia. A public’s embeddedness in larger publics, an important point that Warner makes in his book [*ibid.*: 63], needs to be further explored to understand QFF’s public performance. This embeddedness makes it difficult to view oppositionality as something clear-cut and fixed, as the intersection and overlapping of publics may result in strategies that transcend oppositional articulation.

Here I find it useful to return to Michel de Certeau’s notion of strategy and tactic to think further of the counterpublic. He describes strategy as “a calculus of force relationships” [1984: 5] emanating from formal institutions such as corporations or state agencies in order to provide a “proper” space. On the other hand, tactics are deployed by the weak who “are seeking to turn the tables on the strong” through “clever tricks” and “maneuvers” in order to negotiate with

spaces of power that constrain them [*ibid.*: 7]. De Certeau's dichotomy between strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the weak has been viewed as limiting [e.g., Pile and Keith 1997]. Moreover, the age of media convergence and participatory culture [Jenkins 2006] facilitated by globalization and digital technology further complicates de Certeau's distinction. The boundaries between media producers and consumers as well as the institutions of power and the powerless are disturbed; the consumers, "the weak" in de Certeau's sense, or "the people formerly known as audience" [Rosen 2006], are now transformed into participants in cultural production, and this triggers the question of whether the spaces of resistance can be purely tactical. Steve Pile suggests that we move beyond a dichotomous view by looking at "strategies (for the production of space) and tactics (under the nose of the enemy)" as "two spatiality's [*sic*] in the repertoire of struggle" [Pile and Keith 1997: 23]. Counterpublics therefore might oscillate between a strategy to claim a territory and a tactic to negotiate with confining spaces. In the case of QFF, both strategy and tactics are deployed as part of their cultural activism. The notion of oppositionality beomes unstable, as they create strategies to expand their territories while tactically inserting queer agenda within their embeddedness in a larger urban middle-class public.

Q! Film Festival deploys a strategy, which I call "strategic cinephilia," to claim itself as a legitimate segment of the urban middle-class public culture. Strategic cinephilia can be characterized as an "inclusionary boundary-work," a term I borrow from Karyn Lacy [2007] to analyze the strategies of minorities to avoid discrimination in the dominant culture. Lacy argues that middle-class blacks in the United States engage in inclusionary boundary-work as strategies for the construction of public identities by emphasizing their middle-class status in white-dominated spaces. Middle-class culture functions therefore as an "area of consensus and shared experience" that blurs the distinctions between the black and white middle "classes" [*ibid.*: 75]. Lacy's framework is productive in looking at how QFF obscures the division between a queer community and a dominant heterosexual public by highlighting what the organizers call "good quality films" as a shared passion. Thus, while facilitating new spaces for queer social interaction (strengthening the queer counterpublic), QFF has also made the queer discourse more visible and gradually more acceptable to an Indonesian urban middle-class public. Strategic cinephilia encompasses new ways of relating one's group through the media, cultural venues and shared keywords.

First of all, the organizers intervene in media representations by taking advantage of their position as part of the new constellation of media in the post-Suharto era. In 1999, in the spirit of *Reformasi*, the government replaced the 1982 Press Law with a new law that removes the government's control to license, regulate, censor, or ban the press. The lack of bureaucratic requirements fostered the birth of many media, including newly franchised magazines targeted at the middle class. Many of the QFF organizers and supporters worked as freelance writers for new print media such as the film magazine *Cinemagz* and the lifestyle magazine *Jakarta Kini*. They also wrote for English-language newspapers (*The Jakarta Post* and later *The Jakarta Globe*) widely read by expatriates and educated middle-class Indonesians. In the 1980s, as argued by Boellstorff [2005], *gay* and *lesbi* recognized their subject positions through a distorted mirror provided by

a limited number of (major) print media. Within this media landscape, many LGBT individuals had no bargaining power to challenge the representation of non-normative sexualities as being a form of deviance. In the post-Suharto period writers affiliated with the Q-Munity had more access and influence to some, if not all, media. Expanding the DIY spirit they wrote articles on the film festival while helping to circulate the queer discourse. With the development of the internet these articles and other promotional materials were circulated through mailing lists consisting of film writers and journalists.

In the effort to claim their territory QFF organizers chose the venues for film screening strategically. QFF was held at foreign cultural centers such as the Goethe Institut, Centre Culturel Français, Istituto Italiano di Cultura and Erasmus Huis, which, since the New Order period, have been recognized as places for urban middle-class Indonesians seeking arts and cultural events to frequent. The screenings have also been held in Teater Utan Kayu (now Salihara), an elite hub for literature, arts and theater, and *ruangrupa*, which was considered a less elitist but more hip space for young urban artists and enthusiasts. Through a partnership with these cultural centers QFF achieved its status as a hip, artsy event that the urban middle class, queer or straight, felt obliged to participate in. According to John Badalu many students, journalists or people working in the art fields who would hang out (“*nongkrong*”) in cultural centers were curious about the films without really realizing that it was a lesbian and gay film festival. “Some of them asked: what is queer? They just found out on the spot that the films are about sexual minorities,” John said. “But after that they spread it through word of mouth: hey, I’ve just seen the films. They turned out great!”

Finally, the festival’s emphasis on opening up access to art-house films is a strategic way to reach a public beyond the organizers’ own queer “friends” (“*temen-temen sendiri*,” as John puts it). The first Q! Film Screening’s modest blog states that the aim of Q-Munity is “to screen art films to the public audience” [Q-Munity 2002a]. Q-Munity founders identify themselves as cinephiles (“a bunch of movie buffs and contributor writers for several media in Jakarta”) rather than LGBT activists [Q-Munity 2002b]. In the early formations of QFF, the founders did not frame the film screening as a form of queer identity politics: “its members don’t necessarily reflect their sexual orientation and they are not gay activists at all.” Even in 2004, when they added more explicit information about the film selection on their blog (on “gay, lesbian, and transgender”), with an objective to give “a positive image on gay people,” they still emphasized their subject position as cultural activists rather than gay activists. Q-Munity, according to the blog, was initiated by “freelance journalists who are concerned about the arts management in Indonesia” and in that case they “want to improve the accessibility of performing arts and film appreciation to as widest public audience as possible” [Q-munity 2004]. Counterpublics, explains Warner, “fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability” [2002: 121]. The public imagined by QFF includes both queer subjects and art communities who are open to different ideas and values. Though some Q-Munity members later worked closely with LGBT organizations, QFF maintains the love for cinema as a language of “stranger sociability,” a key

phrase that binds them to the film festival and its organization. Cinephilia is strategically used to establish the link between strangers who constitute the QFF public.

QFF's strategy to embrace the wider public by developing an interest in cinema, and along with that, queer cinema, is reflected in their policy for selecting films. Films screened in QFF are "films about LGBT regardless of the sexual orientation of the makers," which draws a distinction between QFF and "V" Film Festival, a women's film festival in Jakarta that only screened films made by women. However, QFF still assigns a special section of its programming to highlight the work of a queer director who deals with queer issues. For instance, they have cooperated with the Spanish Embassy to screen the films of Pedro Almodovar. As John explained, "For this particular section, we focus on a queer filmmaker, from Indonesia or abroad, who is comfortable with his/her sexuality. We try not to choose a heterosexual filmmaker."

Through an inclusionary mode of boundary work the festival manages to foreground queer discourse as a part of the urban middle-class conception of identity after the 1998 *Reformasi*. The "frontier for a queer public" [*ibid.*: 120] has constantly expanded with certain vocabularies surrounding cinema, the arts and culture that allowed more people to recognize themselves as part of the QFF's public. At least in Jakarta, QFF has played a crucial role in "queering" public places beyond the usual sites marked as *gay* and *lesbi* spots, such as the Sarinah Thamrin shopping areas, Pasar Festival fitness center or Blok M Plaza. Cultural centers such as Salihara were known as heteronormative spaces, but the visibility of QFF strengthened the "open-minded" and "liberal" image that they attempted to promote.

PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS: BETWEEN INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

I would like to return to the issue of positionality that I touched on briefly at the beginning of this article in order to reflect on QFF's publicness and my participation in it. While acknowledging my outsider's position, as a researcher who lived in the United States, I am also an Indonesian writer and a cultural activist who belongs with the artistic urban middle-class public that QFF engages with. Attending QFF's public discussions in cultural centers allows me to witness how the cultural spaces are transforming as they incorporate QFF's events. I recognize myself as part of the QFF's public address and develop a sense of belonging not only to the arts and culture scene but also to the queer community. However, as I will show in this section, the sense of inclusion based on the affinity of class and space has its unintended consequences.

Organized by QFF such as Q! Gossip (discussion on queer issues), Q! Literature (discussion on queer books), and Q&A with film directors, public discussions at places like Salihara deserve special attention here in order to analyze the public impact of QFF. Since most of these events involve public figures and public intellectuals they often draw more public attention than the films themselves. On 30 July 2009 I attended the launching of the Indonesian edition of the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff's book, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, at

Salihara, a cultural center established in 2008. This space is located on Salihara street, which is also the site for the Teater Utan Kayu community. Now named the “Salihara community,” this group was founded by the poet and intellectual figure Goenawan Mohamad at the twilight of the Suharto regime. An ethnographic research of sexualities in Indonesia, *The Gay Archipelago* was translated into Indonesian with the title *The Gay Archipelago: Seksualitas dan Bangsa di Indonesia* and published by the Q-Munity Press in 2009. As part of his activism Boellstorff, with the help of John Badalu and the Q-Munity Press, made the e-book available as a free download to reach a wider audience in Indonesia. The 2009 QFF discussion, featuring Boellstorff and the gay activist Dede Oetomo, had drawn a new kind of public that I rarely saw in Salihara.

As a regular visitor who has often been invited to participate in the Salihara events, I notice that the Salihara/Teater Utan Kayu community is largely dominated by (heterosexual) males. Except for the writer Ayu Utami, all of the Salihara curators—poets, novelists, art critics and musicians—are male, and it was only in the last few years that they have regularly presented works under the rubric of “women artists” or organized discussions on gender and sexuality. Being featured as the site of the reading gave Salihara a different kind of visibility. The Salihara discussion room and the café were packed with people who were mostly gay, lesbian and feminist activists. Boellstorff’s presentation, in Bahasa Indonesia, was followed by a discussion entitled “Queering the Movement: *The Rise of LGBT Movement in Indonesia*” (*Bangkitnya Gerakan LGBT di Indonesia*), which raised the question about how the LGBT movement could be integrated within the discourse of national and global human rights activists. One of the issues that provoked intense debates was the exclusion of LGBT activism by Indonesian human rights activists. The feminist activist Julia Suryakusuma, who was sitting on a front seat, commented that this problem had been faced by feminist organizations a decade ago, and she reminded the audience that gender activism in general still had a long way to go. Her statement provoked some members of the audience to share the challenges of gender activism based on their personal experiences. The intense atmosphere was still felt after the discussion when participants continued to converse informally at the Salihara café.

In the following years Salihara has continued to organize similar discussions, with topics such as “Coming Out: A Reflection and Home” featuring the new Q Film Festival co-director Meninaputri Wismurti. Indeed Salihara has been slowly transforming. After years of facing accusations of dominance in the literary field, mainly because of the greater privileges received by writers associated with their circle, the community has refashioned its image to incorporate a wider public by inviting new types of public figure, from feminist professors to indie bands. The public discussion about non-normative sexualities could be considered as a part of this image revamp, and underlines the community’s motto: “Together with the public nurturing freedom.”

Taking place at Salihara and other places, QFF public discussions have contributed to the process of “queering” the urban public space by disseminating queer discourse. They have also, according to the scholar and filmmaker Laura Coppens, improved “queer reading skills” [2009: 181]. Warner highlights the

transformative function of a counterpublic as opposed to the dominant public: “counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scenemaking will be transformative, not replicative merely” [2002: 122]. Films screened were discussed extensively, providing an opportunity for the audience to interpret queer images critically and allowing an exchange of views and transformative relations between queer and heterosexual participants. For instance, when a heterosexual filmmaker, Edwin, was invited for a Q&A session at the Erasmus Huis auditorium after the screening of his indie film, *Babi Buta yang Ingin Terbang* (Blind Pig Who Wants to Fly) [2008], an audience member offered his critique of Edwin’s depiction of homosexuality.¹¹ A festival art-house film that was not screened in Indonesian mainstream movie theaters, *Babi Buta yang ingin Terbang* did not focus on a queer identity but rather posed a personal reflection of Edwin, a Chinese Indonesian filmmaker, on being Chinese in Indonesia. One scene in the film, however, portrays the Chinese protagonist as being compelled to participate in a threesome with a military figure and a government official. The audience member praised the “absurd” non-linear structure of the film, but he felt disturbed by the gay scene and regarded it as irrelevant. Edwin responded that he attempts to depict Indonesia’s masculine political system and how “the relation between the government and the military is very masculine.” This raised more questions about why such a masculine relation had to be articulated through a gay visual metaphor. The metaphor, which according to the audience would only strengthen the stereotype of gays as sex-crazed people, led to the commentary among the audience that the film is “homophobic.” Edwin’s response was quite short (“I don’t think this is a homophobic film”), but during our brief talk after the discussion he seemed more reflective about the audience response. He mentioned that he had received a similar critique in a festival abroad, and a queer perspective in the reception of the film made him think a lot about that scene.

The QFF discussion forums, as exercises of “queer reading skills” in the public space, contribute to the lively atmosphere of the long tradition of public intellectualism in Indonesia. Indonesians are very enthusiastic about public talks and discussions, public opinions written in the media, and public intellectual figures (who are more respected than university professors, who would often only go to academic conferences). This tradition of public discussion however is strongly grounded in a middle-class public culture. Thus, while QFF public discussions are strategic in expanding the festival stakeholders from LGBT people to the larger urban middle-class audience, the problem of language has excluded the lower-class queer communities. Language here means the intellectual language used in the discussions as well as the language of the films. Most of the films use English subtitles due to a lack of funding to provide subtitles in Bahasa Indonesia, and this has created a challenge for QFF to reach beyond its middle-class confinement. Until now, John admits that the class issue remains a challenge:

How to get beyond the middle-class audience has been a longtime problem for QFF. The lower-class people, such as the *waria* [male transvestites] who would hang out in Blok M area, could not access it. They came only to the festival only to cheer [*memeriahkan*], hang out, and check out who’s there. Many came for sexual aims. But they don’t understand the

film. Even for the middle class it is hard because most of them are used to see[ing] only Hollywood films.¹²

The queer counterpublic facilitated by QFF has its boundaries, and it has excluded less privileged urban subjects like the lower-class, less-educated queer. John's statement about the "*waria* who would hangout in Blok M area" indicates that although now there are more *waria* people with higher social status and education, many *waria* still occupy the lower-class sphere and labor as sex workers. The *waria* in Indonesian society are very visible in public, but their marginalized position makes them prone to discrimination and violence. *Waria* have been part of traditional rituals as well as contemporary communities, usually known as salon owners, performers or sex workers [Boellstorff 2005]. People interact with them on a daily basis, but they occupy an inferior position signified by the common use of such derogatory terms as *banci* or *bencong* (effeminate man).

A Q! Gossip discussion held in 2012 had a strong potential to invite more *waria* audience to share their experience and discuss critically the representation of *waria* in films. The event, titled "Waria Warriors," featured Miss Waria 2006 Merlyn Sopjan, the male actor Donny Damara, who plays a *waria* in the film *Lovely Man* [2011], and myself, described as a "film observer and gender-issue enthusiast." It was moderated by the *waria* activist Luluk Surahman and was attended by *waria* groups who were part of the Transchool, an organization focusing on education for young *waria* about issues such as gender, sexuality and human rights. The event allowed views from the *waria* community about how *waria* are portrayed on-screen, exemplified by how they praised *Lovely Man* for projecting a more complex image of *waria* that is different from the stereotypical comic figures. The *waria* activists also addressed stereotypes ingrained in *waria* communities, amongst them the common view on *waria* authenticity built on the premise that "you are not a *waria* if you never sell sex on the street." The discussion in general was very dynamic, but unfortunately it could not reach a wide audience as usual because at that time QFF faced a serious problem with its identity as a public organization. In the 2012 QFF, the organizers had to cancel many screenings because the police issued a statement that they could not guarantee the security of the event in view of the protests by the Islam Defenders Group (FPI) in 2010.

THE CLANDESTINE SPACE

The FPI protests had serious repercussions for the public expressions of QFF. Foreign cultural institutions, including Q-Munity's long-term partners, refused to screen Q! films due to the potential threats of FPI or other vigilante groups. In the following year, some of them agreed to give support to QFF but immediately withdrew when the organizers broke the bad news that the police were unable to guarantee the security of the festival. The protest has indeed forced QFF to make some adjustments, particularly in making their events more secretive.

On a more optimistic note, QFF found a new partner and screening site: KONTRAS (The Commission of the “Disappeared” and Victims of Violence), a Jakarta-based NGO which, based on the organization’s focus on the human rights discourses, supported the festival organizers in dealing with state authorities in 2010. This obliged Q-Munity, originally started as a community of cinephiles, to put more emphasis on political activism. Rizal Iwan, a co-founder of QFF, reflected on the protest as a turning point for QFF: “Back then we did not really advocate gay rights, equality for homosexuals, or things like that. It was more light-hearted. The link to gay activism became more prominent after we were protested.”¹³

The attack against QFF brings the organizers closer to other enclaves of gender activism, connecting them not only to LGBT NGOs but also to feminist and human rights organizations. However, with the lack of protection from the authorities and the waning support from institutions that used to serve as an infrastructure for the festival, QFF had to rethink the circulatory space of the queer counterpublic. The clandestine mode reversed the expanded space back into a “closed community,” one with limited circulation among its members. In 2011, before the screening of the premiere film, the organizers made statements that they chose to “remain strong” despite the FPI protest and diminishing support from their partners. In the tradition of Q!, which would show funny short videos featuring the organizers in various interesting roles and costumes, the festival that year still showed videos they made, but having a theme of “unwanted guests.” That night I was part of the small Q! audience who cherished their spirit, but I also realized that we were celebrating resilience in a ghettoized space.

The repercussions following the FPI protest have caused QFF to shift its focus from strategically claiming publicness to finding ways to survive tactically. The clandestine mode is a tactic for “moving through spaces, (in)visibly, (un)noticed” [Pile and Keith 1997: 23]. This has limited QFF’s publicness, but at the same time, as suggested by Rizal Iwan, the “light-hearted” cultural activism is now more prominent in its stance as gay rights advocates. As a counterpublic, QFF is currently oscillating between visibility and invisibility with the hope of finding new affiliations along the way.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that while during the New Order regime the queer counterpublic positioned itself as a counter to the dominant heteronormative values, Q! Film Festival nurtured a counterpublic that is embedded in the wider urban middle-class public. Unlike Lambda Indonesia, which was established as a direct challenge to the tendency of the mainstream media to pathologize non-normative sexualities, QFF was shaped by the burgeoning of independent cultural initiatives that created a new dynamics in the post-Suharto cultural landscape. With this background, QFF formed a stronger affiliation with the arts and culture scene and the urban middle-class public. This position has affected the strategy and tactics used by QFF. As a queer counterpublic QFF provided a new space for

queer social interaction outside the usual spaces such as chatrooms and bars. In its publicity however QFF claimed that the main goal of their cultural activism was to open up access to “good quality films,” taking advantage of hip and artsy venues and the organizers’ access to media outlets. Through “strategic cinephilia” QFF expanded its public address and destabilized Warner’s notion of oppositionality. Beginning with art-house films, QFF further claimed territoriality by projecting the image that queer discourses are an essential part of the post-Suharto urban middle-class identity. The rise of religious conservatism has posed a challenge to QFF’s publicness, forcing it to resituate itself and find tactics to negotiate with the confining spaces. In its clandestine mode following the FPI protest the awareness of a conflictual relation is more pronounced.

After more than a decade QFF still faces difficult challenges in continuing its work. The festival has to redefine and reconfigure the public it addresses while taking into account the tactics in dealing with conservative and militant groups. This is not exclusively a problem of QFF. Various forms of cultural activism must confront the same problem. While having to anticipate protests from vigilante groups like Islam Defenders Front, at the policy level, QFF is also restricted by new laws such as the Pornography Law and the Information and Electronic Transaction (ITE) Law that maintains censorship in the name of national morality, which is increasingly religious in nature. Both laws, ratified in 2008, aim to regulate the production and circulation of images (particularly those deemed pornographic) that are against the norms of Indonesian society. While the goal is to protect children and teenagers from the exposure to pornographic materials, the laws have been used to justify discrimination against women and LGBT groups. The problems in dealing with religious conservatism and repressive laws expose the vulnerability of cultural activism in Indonesia; how to find common ground and strengthen affiliation remains a challenging, if not unresolved, question.

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NOTES

1. Nuraini Juliastuti, founder of the Indie Cultural Studies Research Center, KUNCI, mentions that the emergence of visual arts communities initiated by young people in Yogyakarta, such as IVAA (Indonesian Visual Arts Archive) or Kedai Kebun Forum, has offered an alternative to formal spaces such as the state-owned cultural center Taman Budaya. The characteristics of the alternative spaces include the involvement of local communities in cultural production and the appropriation of a modern and urban lifestyle [2009].

2. Some articles and edited volumes have attempted to define and map out independent cinema in Southeast Asia. See, for instance, a collection of essays edited by May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay, *Glimpses of Freedom* [2012]. That book also features an interview with Q! Film Festival founder John Badalu.
3. The wedding coverage marked the entrance of *gay* and *lesbi* (lesbian) in Indonesia's mainstream media [Boellstorff 2005].
4. The relationship between gender, politics, and family ideology during the New Order regime has been discussed extensively by scholars [for instance, Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis 1987; Suryakusuma 1996; and Shiraishi 1997].
5. Tom Boellstorff writes that the local terms *gay* and *lesbi* (*gay* and *lesbian*) became widely used in the early 1970s and 1980s [2005: 60]. He argues that the dissemination of the terms by the national mainstream mass media contributed to the formation of *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions. In this article I use the terms *gay* and *lesbi* instead of the universal "gay and lesbian" to refer to Indonesian subject positions pointed out by Boellstorff.
6. John Badalu, personal interview, August 10, 2011.
7. John Badalu, personal interview, August 10, 2011.
8. John Badalu, personal interview, August 10, 2011.
9. John Badalu, personal interview, August 10, 2011.
10. Hartoyo, email interview, October 28, 2013.
11. Q&A with Edwin, Q! Film Festival, Erasmus Huis, Jakarta, August 4, 2009.
12. John Badalu, personal interview, August 10, 2011.
13. Rizal Iwan, email interview, November 25, 2013.

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