Published on ***sexgenderbody*** (http://sexgenderbody.com)

Taking Stock

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Created ***16 Oct 2009 - 14:07***

[1]Do homosexual couples in Malaysia live in fear? We talk to Pang Khee Teik and Jerome Kugan, co-organisers of Seksualiti Merdeka 2009: Our bodies, our rights[1].

If you ask me who I?m really afraid of, I am most afraid of gay men,? says Pang Khee Teik. It?s a startling confession coming from the 36-year-old arts programme director of the Annexe Gallery, who had just days before organised the second annual Seksualiti Merdeka, an event aimed at affirming sexuality rights that first started in 2008.

Pang is not afraid of all gay men, however; just those who have given up exercising their rights to express their sexuality, and urging others to do the same.

> ?Some gay men feel that by being visible and out there, we are being crass. Others believe that being gay is a test of God and those who give in to their desires have failed. Some gay men said life is unfair anyway, so we should just put up and shut up.?

More than his fear of police harassment or a clampdown by religious authorities, Pang?s fear of having to ?put up and shut up? is what drove this year?s Seksualiti Merdeka, which was held from Aug 12 to 16.



[2]Co-founded with Annexe Gallery?s media manager Jerome Kugan, the second Seksualiti Merdeka was themed ?Our bodies, our rights?, with the focus on consolidating the activist base of those involved in the struggle for sexuality rights.

In contrast to last year?s event ? which was held in conjunction with the popular under-RM100 art bazaar Art For Grabs ? Seksualiti Merdeka this year marked the duo?s level of ambition for the event, as it now stands on its own with a stronger theme and larger participation across the sexual divide.

Contrary to what the public might think, not everyone who attended or volunteered for the event was homosexual, even though many active members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) rights movement attended it.

> ?More than half our volunteers were straight. It?s a sign that there is no ?us? versus

?them?. We?re all in this together,? says Pang, laughing off the notion that Seksualiti Merdeka was an exclusively LGBT event.

?We did not discriminate against heterosexuals, and the fact that people paid good money to see the evening performances means that the public is ready to look at this issue,? he adds.

By ?public?, however, Pang did not mean ?all of Malaysia?.

Pang sighs when asked whether by holding the event in English and in an urban venue, he was conscious of being exclusive.

?Of course,? he says. ?We admit that is one of the weaknesses.?

In defence of the language choice, Sabah-born Kugan says choosing English as a medium was strictly a practical issue. ?Some of the presenters were more comfortable speaking in English, so we left it at that,? he adds.

So, are Malaysians ready to talk about sex and sexuality?

?I think they are, but let?s give it a few more years before we go mainstream,? says Pang.

Kugan adds that currently, talking about sex and sexuality was mostly done in private, safe spaces such as the Annexe Gallery due to the lack of backing from various establishments. ?Even the liberal quarters are not ready; plus the country has bigger fish to fry first,? Kugan says, referring to the current political turmoil surrounding Malaysia.

?Besides, we are not that political,? adds Pang. Their actions scream otherwise, however, if one considers the infamous catch-cry of second-wave feminist Carol Hanisch that the ?personal is political?, meaning that state policies affect personal choices such as the right to marry and start a family.

[2]For now, the team behind Seksualiti Merdeka is concentrating on building networks. With Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir officiating at the event, and the backing of the Kuala Lumpur Bar Council, the organisers seem to have done well in making powerful alliances.

However, Pang admits that these partnerships were part of the organisers? way of covering their backs in the event of harassment from the police.

While there are no laws against homosexuality, laws criminalising ?unnatural? sexual acts even when performed by heterosexual couples are present. The internal paranoia of persecution for even being with other homosexuals in public spaces has exacerbated these fears.

?The fear of being caught for being gay is not unfounded. Because people don?t understand their rights, and the authorities often misuse power to extort money... people are disempowered,? says Pang. ?When they are disempowered, they panic. So they give in, they pay bribes.?

Pang and Kugan both attribute part of the disempowerment to negative portrayals of LGBT individuals in

the media, and ?witch hunts? carried out, especially by Malay-language newspapers such as the Aug 13 front-page sensational exposé in Harian Metro of a private party titled ?Pesta lesbian? (lesbian festival).

?Often the local media censor words like ?gay? and ?lesbian? because they feel like we?re promoting homosexuality,? says Pang. ?But you cannot ?promote? a biological function. We are not ashamed of promoting people being confident of whom they are.?

Adds Kugan: ?We are promoting acceptance of ourselves and each other.?

While last year?s Seksualiti Merdeka aimed at fostering compassion towards sexual minorities, this year?s event took a brave new step in empowering a person?s sexuality in the form of workshops, forums and tutorials. Some of the topics included the power of the police and where it ends, queer theory and human rights in Malaysia.

After years of sweeping homosexuality and sexuality rights under the carpet for fear of persecution and offending the sensitivities of others, it appears that the LGBT community has stopped being afraid.

?Some of us have been made to live with the awareness that we don?t fit in because of the way we love,? says Pang.

He jokes that perhaps next year?s event should focus on homophobia. ?We should get all the homophobes together, sit them down and get them to tell us why they?re afraid of us and why they disapprove,? says Pang.

Something about the way he said this made it sound like he was not joking, after all.

This article appeared in Options, the lifestyle pullout of The Edge Malaysia, Issue 770, Aug 31-Sep 6, 2009. [2]

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