

Sat, June 27th, 2026
at Titik Dua Ubud

MONISME

SOLO EXHIBITION BY
RIAR RIZALDI

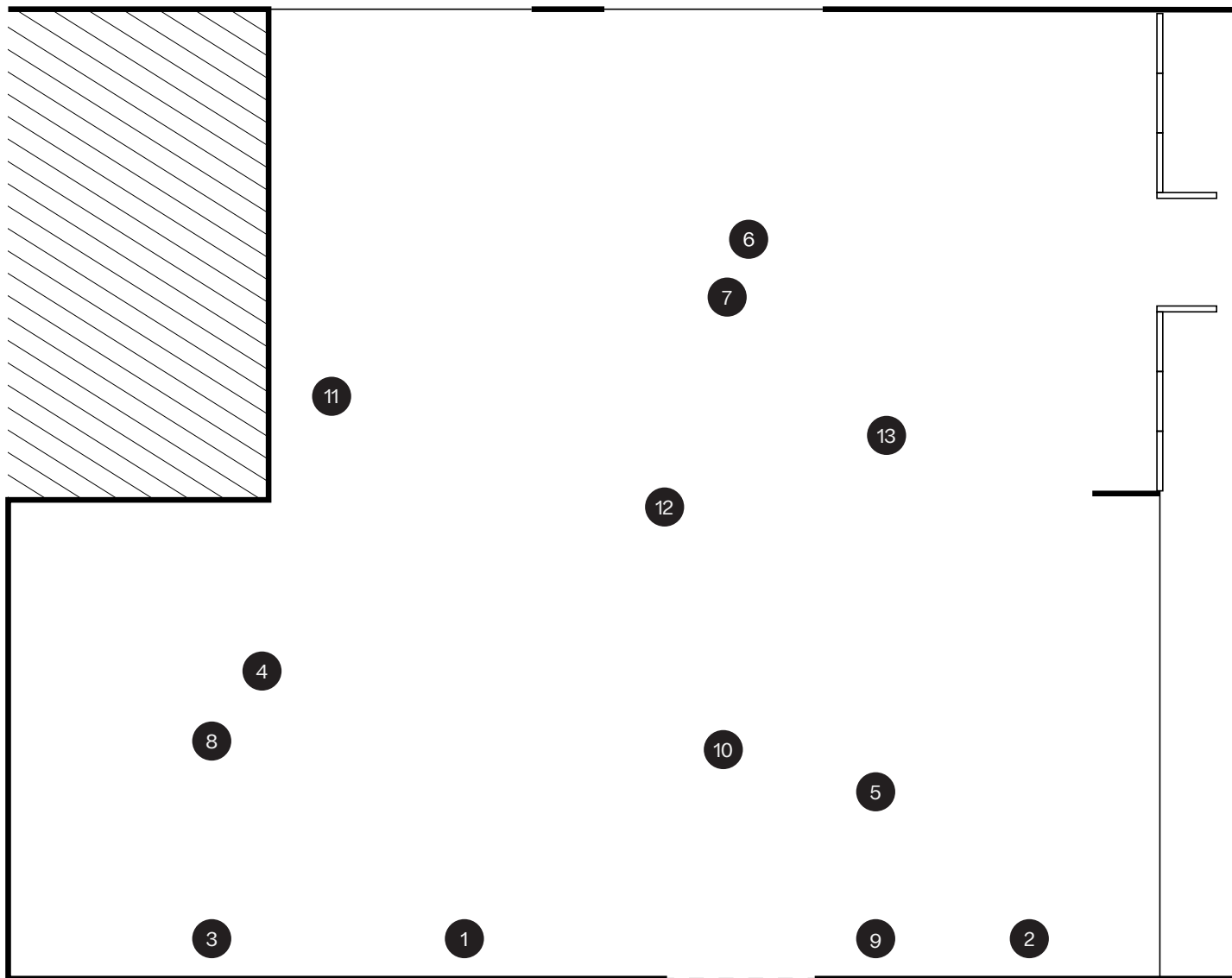
***Monisme* or the Beginning and End of the World**

The road movie begins when we choose what to let go, and in the great escape, we propel ourselves toward something else. Characters move forward without knowing where the journey will end, with the trust that the feeling of arrival will overwhelm them eventually. In *Monisme* (2023), Riar Rizaldi's feature-length docu-fiction, the road unfolds on the slopes of Mount Merapi—Indonesia's most active volcano, the mountain of fire, the creator and destroyer. In Javanese cosmology, Merapi is not necessarily a backdrop to such a journey but is the northern node of an axis. The mountain anchors a sacred corridor that runs south through the Sultan's palace in Yogyakarta and continues to the Indian Ocean, where Nyai Ratu Kidul, the Queen of the South Sea, governs her watery domain. The Sultan's traditional title, *Susunan*, translates as the Volcano or the Life-Giving Mountain. Annual offerings are carried to the crater. Whatever descends and is produced from the mountain arrives understood as a gift returned.¹

Monisme is the Indonesian and Dutch form of monism, the philosophical position that reality is ultimately one thing rather than two (dualism) or many (pluralism).² This is Merapi's world and we all just live in it. For Rizaldi, its eruptions are understood as epistemological events and murmurs of the eventuality of human extinction. "Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception," the film's voiceover says. In the artist's lexicon, the investigation into the post-human is quite literal, an entire

world without humans following the big explosion that has been promised and predicted for hundreds of years. What is intoned in the film recalibrates what follows, asking us to understand the present moment not as a stable platform from which we observe the occasional catastrophe, but rather positions survival as an extremist improbability that is interpreted as a natural accident.

Across his broader practice, Rizaldi returns consistently to the *longue durée* of geological and biological time. Approximately 2.4 billion years ago, cyanobacteria began producing oxygen as a byproduct of photosynthesis, and that oxygen accumulated in an atmosphere that had evolved without it, functioning as a toxin for the anaerobic organisms that populated the planet. The Great Oxidation Event, as it is now called, was the first mass extinction in Earth's biological record.³ One form of life's abundance was another form of life's catastrophe. Further, some physicists now speculate that the Big Bang was not just the beginning of everything we know, but a transition from a previous state, a collapse giving rise to expansion, in which destruction and creation are not sequential events but a single indivisible one.⁴ What Darwinian progress describes as gradual improvement toward fitness is a story that makes sense at one scale of time and becomes unrecognizable at another. With the metric of deep geological or cosmic time, what persists is circular, like the roads traveled in *Monisme*. The post-human is not a future condition to be dreaded or celebrated. It is the already-



1. Bumi Hangus (Paramiliter - Hahan)
printed on paper
84,1 cm x 118,9 cm
2026

2. Formasi Monisme
printed on paper
118.9 cm x 66.9 cm
2026

3. Deformasi Monisme
printed on paper
118.9 cm x 66.9 cm
2026

4. Merapi #1
3D-printed model of Mount Merapi
in PETG HF
+- 20 cm
2026

5. Merapi #2
3D-printed model of Mount Merapi
in PETG HF
+- 20 cm
2026

6. Wedhus Gembel Skull
mixed material
105 cm x ... x 98 cm
2026

7. Monisme Scene 15 -
The Monkey and The Hunter
displayed on Projector
2026

8. Pyroclasts are eloquent storyteller
displayed on Sony Trinitron TV 12
inch (2 pcs) Channel 1 & 2
2026

9. Kidung's Camera
displayed on Panasonic CRT 8 inch
B&W
2026

10. A Very Brief Story of Merapi Mining
displayed on Sony Smart TV 55 inch
4K Channel 1
2026

11. A Very Brief Story of Merapi Mining
displayed on Sony Smart TV 55 inch
4K Channel 2
2026

12. Suryono's Camera
displayed on 3 Casio Portable TV
2026

existing proposal of the volcano, from which our current epoch constitutes a brief appearance.

Rizaldi is a research-based artist, and the description is accurate in ways that the usual expectations of the term are not. Research, as most institutions define it, produces archives which consist of accumulated ordered collections of evidence in documents, paperwork, and objects. Instead, Rizaldi's process collects and then restages and redramatizes, bringing the research back into encounter with the bodies, spaces, and voices that generated it. This is less like an archival practice and more like what certain filmmakers call restaging the apparatus, in making visible the mechanisms through which images produce authority, and in doing so, relocating authority back in the encounter itself.⁵

At first, his self-reflexivity might seem to work against enchantment, that when you demystify the machinery, the spell is broken. But Rizaldi is able to hold both motions together through exposures that make encounters possible. If enchantment is "a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness" or a receptivity to the pull of things that can coexist with critical intelligence rather than being its opposite,⁶ then Rizaldi's practice re-enchants by suggesting a different relationship which reduces the distance to the object and forces confrontation with its actual scale. To show the CCTV feed alongside scripted fiction alongside notebook footage, to put the volcanologist's data next to the shaman's address next to the colonial photograph, is to make visible what all of those registers share—that is, their truth is found as blind men with an elephant.⁷ Cinema in Rizaldi's hands shows the mechanisms through which Merapi is monitored, measured, archived, and administered, yet simultaneously produce an encounter with the mountain's vehement wildness. Re-enchantment in cinema does not mean the restoration of an illusion. It means finding, when every image has been shown to fall short, that the thing those images were drawn from is in itself an inexhaustible resource.

In the film, the female investigative journalist drives, stops, and looks up to see the plumes. On clear days, it is white and soft, nearly indistinguishable from the clouds. On other days, it rises gray and columnar. When the volcano breathes more forcefully, the plume billows into shapes that people in the foothills read as omens. Each witness read the shapes differently: the volcanologist notes volume and ash content for potential evacuation notices, the shaman delineates movement for spiritual guidance, the miner balances the risk of one's work compared to the windfall of fresh silica to mine. The road curves around the mountain and the plume turns with it, governing the open sky regardless of where you stand. In *Monisme*, the journalist carries a camera, the observation station's CCTV feeds appear inside the film, and scenes from *Pyroclasts Are Eloquent Storytellers* (2022), the notebook film Rizaldi assembled from his years of accumulated research footage, resurface inside the feature. Rizaldi describes *Pyroclasts*⁸ in terms borrowed from Pier Paolo Pasolini's concept of the notebook film.⁹ Adam Bobbette observes that for the colonial geologists who established Java's first volcanological stations, "mapping the edge of a volcanic crater was to glimpse into the whole of the earth."¹⁰ What is extended from this observation is that each image of Merapi is an attempt to glimpse something that the image cannot contain, and that two centuries of attempting this have yet to produce a totalizing image.

One actor, Rendra Bagus Pamungkas, carries three of the human registers through which Merapi is currently inhabited. As a volcanologist, he reads the mountain through data and monitoring screens at the observation station above the treeline. As sand miner, he works the andesite deposits that the volcano's past eruptions have laid down on the slopes, building a livelihood. As shaman, he addresses the mountain in a language that the monitoring instruments cannot register. The media theorist Sy Taffel proposes a framework called scalar entanglement¹¹ to describe phenomena that operate simultaneously across multiple relational scales, where those scales are constitutively interdependent rather than adjacent layers.¹² Applied to *Monisme*, the framework describes Rizaldi's refusal to rank the volcanologist, the miner, and the shaman as competing positions on Merapi. They are entangled registers of a single phenomenon, each revealing what the others cannot access, each constituted partly by the existence of the others. The volcanologist's data becomes actionable because the miner needs to know when to leave the slopes. The miner's livelihood operates within a cosmological framework of reciprocal obligation that the shaman's practice maintains. The shaman's authority depends on the volcano's geological power, which the instruments measure.

Bobbette describes what he calls political geology as the study of volcanoes as vectors driving geosocial formations, organizing political life in ways that economic or sociological analysis cannot explain alone.¹³ The Javanese sultanates understood themselves as alliances between rulers and volcanic deities, alliances whose terms were set by the mountain. The palace in Yogyakarta occupies the midpoint of the Merapi-to-South-Sea corridor because that is where the corridor requires the palace to be placed. The Sultan's title names this arrangement structurally: the palace holds what the mountain sends, and the mountain's authority is what makes the palace authoritative.

The sand miners in *Monisme* work within the same landscape. One miner acknowledges that his extraction destabilizes conditions on the slope, that he is both produced by the violence of past eruptions and is actively contributing to the conditions for the next one. The shaman Rizaldi worked with during production described the spirit world as a parallel universe running alongside ours, separated by a strict border. To maintain the order of the spiritual world, we must refuse the extractive logics in the world we live in, the natural world. This is an anti-extractivist logic embedded in a cosmological framework that preconditions the spiritual world's stability as dependent on the ecological stability of the world we inhabit.

Mark Fisher wrote about the way capitalist horror projects structural violence outward as a supernatural monster, making the systematic conditions of exploitation appear in the form of gothic threat.¹⁴ The horror in *Monisme* is formal in genre and ambient in that horror in the fear induced in regards to the source of livelihood, spiritual authority, political legitimacy, and collective identity. *Monisme* opens with violence, in a scene where a farmer is killed in a forest clearing by a group of men at night. The paramilitary violence in the film is organized around the sand mining economy. The riverbeds around Merapi contain andesite deposits left by past eruptions, and those deposits are commercially valuable. What *Monisme* shows, and what reviewers have been careful to characterize, an ecosystem of low-level corruption and turf warfare funded is by the state: paramilitaries who control access to the mining territories and who treat the presence of outsiders—whether environmentalists, volcanologists, or filmmakers—as a territorial incursion.

The volcanologists conducting fieldwork in the forest carry government-issued permits. In more than one scene, those permits mean nothing. A group of paramilitary men become physically and sexually violent toward the researchers. The permits are not a form of protection, just a document from the state apparatus. Horror does not characterize the attack as mere material violence, nor does naming the paramilitaries "state-sanctioned" fully explain what happens in the forest at night. For Fisher, gothic threat is the displaced form of structural violence, the monster standing in for conditions a culture cannot name directly. Rizaldi is doing something different where the threat in *Monisme* is not displaced. The connection between the mountain, the sand economy, the paramilitary structure, and the state is rendered explicitly.

Indonesian horror, particularly from the late 1970s and 1980s, takes the forest seriously as a space of ungovernable force. Films like *The Queen of Black Magic* (1981), *The Warrior* (1981), and the *Barry Prima vehicle Primitif* (1978, which a sand miner in the film cites as a favorite) treat the jungle as a threshold space where the authority structures of the city collapse and other powers take over. Horror normalizes the experience of being in the presence of something that exceeds comprehension. It provides a grammar for fear that is not pathological, offering catharsis for what can be a violent Indonesia.

The film ends in the forest, at night, lit in red lights staged by the artist. The Jathilan trance ritual is underway. Young dancers mount bamboo horses and are possessed by the spirits of Diponegoro's warriors who resisted the Dutch colonial forces in the early nineteenth century, and by the djinns who travel the Merapi-to-South-Sea corridor, carrying communications between the sea goddess and the mountain.¹⁵ The bodies bend, moved by the spirits. Bobbette notes that "the rituals that undergird Javanese religious and political life already point to the 'inseparable material relationship between the island and the Indian Ocean floor,'" a connection that Western plate tectonics would later formalize in different terms.¹⁶ Spiritual, political, and geological authority converge from the same source. What is worth attending to in *Monisme* is that fear and faith are not opposed but orientations toward the same unknowable thing. The volcanologist believes in something he cannot see: the subterranean processes that the seismograph registers in displacement rather than in themselves. The shaman believes in something he cannot see: the spirit world the mountain connects to and transmits. Both practices are faith-based. Both require instruments or ritual to mediate between the practitioner and Merapi.

Earlier this year, I visited the volcanological observation station¹⁷ with Rizaldi, producer B.M. Anggana, and a group of visiting students, which sits approximately four kilometers from the caldera, at the outer edge of the designated safe zone. The top was in the clouds when we arrived and in the clouds when we left. Around the station, independently operated monitoring sites had proliferated over the years run by hobbyist networks, community groups, and enthusiasts, each using their own cameras and seismographs to make records of the mountain's behavior. A crack of thunder came, and the sound returned in a sequence, completing a ring around our heads while holding us at the center of its reverberations. We had arrived at the end of the road and stood there, just to be near the summit of the world.

¹ Adam Bobbette, *The Pulse of the Earth: Political Geology in Java*, Duke University Press, 2023, pp. 51–58.

² The tradition runs from pre-Socratic philosophers through Spinoza, whose formulation is the most influential: that God and Nature are identical, *Deus sive Natura*, one substance expressed through infinite attributes. There are no separate realms of mind and matter, spirit and world. There is only one substance, encountered differently depending on the attribute through which you approach it.

³ Peter D. Ward and Joe Kirschvink, *A New History of Life: The Radical New Discoveries About the Origins and Evolution of Life on Earth*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 66–82.

⁴ Roger Penrose, *Cycles of Time: An Extraordinary New View of the Universe*, Knopf, 2011.

⁵ The reference here evokes Harun Farocki's concept of the "operative image," developed in his essay "Phantom Images." Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images," *Public*, no. 29, 2004, pp. 12–22. Farocki's concern is with images that function instrumentally within industrial or military systems rather than being designed for aesthetic reception. Rizaldi's practice engages similar analytical territory but redirects it toward knowledge systems surrounding volcanic geology in the postcolonial Indonesian context.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 5.

⁷ The story exists across multiple traditions (Jain, Buddhist, Hindu) with different lineages. The Buddhist version from the Pali Canon may be the most appropriate for the Javanese context. Buddharakkhita, Acharya, trans. "Titttha Sutta: The Sectarrians." Access to Insight, 30 Nov. 2013, www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.6.04.budd.html.

⁸ Pyroclasts are fragments of rock, lava, and volcano material that is violently ejected during an eruption. These fragments are red by geologists to study the size, distribution, and composition of the material to learn about the force of the eruption, its direction, and chemistry.

⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini's notion of the notebook film refers to a moving image that renders the research process, capturing the thought process on camera before it knows where it is heading.

¹⁰ Bobbette, p. 22.

¹¹ Drawing on Gregory Bateson's three ecologies of mind, society, and environment, and on Félix Guattari's subsequent reworking of them through complexity theory, Taffel argues that no single register of inquiry is sufficient for a phenomenon that runs through all of them at once, and that the scales themselves do not exist as discrete strata but as interference patterns produced by their mutual entanglement.

¹² Sy Taffel, "Scalar Entanglement in Digital Media Ecologies," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, Spring 2013.

¹³ Bobbette, p. 9.

¹⁴ See Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater Books, 2016, and Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009. Fisher's analysis of gothic horror as a projection of capitalist violence is largely situated within the context of European industrial capitalism and twentieth-century consumer culture. The relationship between horror and extractivism in the Global South involves structurally different conditions, where extraction operates on the land of the communities being extracted from rather than on abstracted labor, and where the animist and cosmological frameworks that give the landscape its authority are among the things being eroded by capital.

¹⁵ For the Jathilan ritual and the figure of Diponegoro's warriors as a site of spiritual and anti-colonial memory, see Merle Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*, EastBridge, 2006.

¹⁶ Bobbette, p. 54.

¹⁷ The colonial volcanological observatory system on Java is documented throughout Bobbette's *The Pulse of the Earth*, particularly in his account of how Dutch scientific institutions built their geological knowledge on the slopes of Javanese volcanoes while systematically discounting the knowledge systems already present there.

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