

THE END IS JUST BEGINNING IS THE END

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In many different readings and discussions on Southeast Asian contemporary art, Agus Suwage occupies a position as one of the most prominent figures. His works have been considered seminal in the latest development of allegorical realism, a tendency which eventually placed the artist's name among the pioneers in the reemergence of figurative painting throughout the nineties.

Within the span of a twenty-five year career, Suwage has traversed back and forth between different media, undergone some major thematic leaps, and kept his penchant for new materials that could trigger new ideas and forms. For the last couple of years, Suwage's works have been showing an obvious tendency to deal with existential questions, particularly concerning life and death. The works in his current exhibition in New York at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, *The End Is Just Beginning Is the End*, however, exemplify a further stage of completion. Not only do they represent his inclination in this recent theme, but they also demonstrate a coalescence between the artist's current understanding of the perennial subject and the strategy and idea of appropriation, which has been persistent in his long artistic journey.

ARTISTIC MATTERS

The cultural atmosphere in Indonesia's New Order era (1966–1998) is an important background to Suwage's artistic career. In the early nineties, Suwage already belonged to a small circle of Indonesian artists who deliberately dealt with sociopolitical commentaries in their works. He took a risky, outcast life choice because during that time freedom of speech was still repressed, and "non-political" expression was prevalent due to the government's depoliticization of art and culture. At that initial stage of his career, Suwage scrutinized a particular art practice that was considered minor. He started with exploration of painterly idioms which emphasized representational, gestural drawings. In addition to his personal fondness, it was also due to the idea that drawing could be a counteraction to the dominant painting idiom and style at that time, namely formalism and abstraction.

Throughout different periods, Suwage's works have gone through different styles and themes, yet have still maintained a specific expression. His play of visual symbols, signs, and icons is always a deliberate play between his personal perception and the collective consciousness.¹ Although they set out from confined local or personal perspectives, the problem of "humanity" generally serves as the basic key issue in the works. While modern anthropocentric views affirm humanity's superiority as "the center," Suwage precisely confronts us with a depiction of humanity as a parasitic creature that is weak, flawed, insular and imperfect: an intelligence-possessing animal.

Suwage first catapulted onto the art world through many regional exhibitions throughout the 1990s and continued to soar as one of the most featured artists representing Indonesia in major international events up until now. It is his unique artistic approach that made his career quickly take flight during that time. Suwage realizes how humor or cynicism is inherent in his way of seeing things, especially when it comes to dogmatism. That is probably why most of his early works did tend to convey witty and sarcastic allusions to the surrounding sociopolitical realities. However, they hardly typify a direct, simple criticism pinpointed toward certain people or parties. Instead, Suwage has a penchant to convey messages imbued with paradox. His social criticism is often complexly layered, hidden, and sometimes ambiguous, as it tends to reveal complexities rather than truth.

To look back at one of his achievements, we may revisit an immense series of works which show Suwage's intense involvement with self-portraiture, which now has become a trademark for the artist. In his subsequent solo exhibitions, *Ekstotika Dotkom* (2000), *I & I & I* (2001), *Channel of Desires* (2002), and *Ough... Nguik!!* (2003), for instance, we could witness how Suwage extensively made use of his own body to perform a myriad of theatric, symbolic poses. There, Suwage could reenact or impersonate artists, heroes, animals, or even his own persona. While doing so, he may laugh at, mock, and ridicule himself. But at the same time, all the gestures, poses, and mimicry actually allude to those in the social and political arenas, as well as complex issues of identity, religion, and art. It is his typical intention to present cynicism and bitter jokes of his own "self," which arguably originates from his Javanese background of living customs and tradition, which have shaped his reputation as an artist whose works can epitomize Indonesian culture.

Although more familiar as a painter, Suwage is also known for his versatile use of media ranging from comic-books, collage,

prints, drawing, photography, kinetic works, sculpture, moving image projection, to large-scale installation. Such a tendency, which initially derives from his penchant for finding the playful from intense artistic efforts, has become the initial impetus for his tireless creation. He comfortably bounces back and forth between different methods of working in order to expand and maintain a rhythm of his thoughts.

ORIGIN, LINEAGE, CHAINS

Agus Suwage has been known for using appropriation as one of his main artistic strategies. Not only does he appropriate other artists' works, he also "recycles" existing photographs, icons, and other kinds of existing imagery. Furthermore, he even "repeats," "copies" and recycles his own work. At least until the end of 1990s, opinions circulating around Suwage's works still tended to look at their relations between such "indirect criticism" and the artist's preference to deal with the censorship that was exerted by the New Order government. Some critics have discussed how Suwage's method of appropriating other works is mainly intended as parody, or allegory of social and political realities.² While some others tended to think that the way Suwage plays around with existing symbols and metaphors reflects the artist's mixologist, post-modern stance, his desire, as one critic says, to "celebrate the uncertainties in the discourse of identity."³

In midst of 2000 Suwage started to work in a rather "unusual" manner. Instead of using his own body or self portrayal as subjects in his works, he started to indulge in working on photographs of other figures - mainly popular figures and icons in music, art, and politics. His *Pause Re-play* (2004), a series of watercolor drawings that visually refer to canonic 20th century performance art photo documentation, is one example of such a propensity. The series marks Suwage's deeper investigation and understanding of the "body" and its relation to visual representation linked to sexuality and other corporeal realities. Patrick D. Flores noted that the method taken by Suwage also suggests an interesting reversal.⁴ Flores underlines how the works incorporate the process of revealing the aura of the body in the performance, which vanished due to photography's reproducibility. By turning photographs into paintings, the aura gains a new vitality, and hence Suwage in fact deliberately plays between doing and sight, between deed and discourse, between acting and reproducing, between "art" and the "documentary" image.

Subsequent to that project, Suwage produced a series of paintings in his solo exhibition *I/CON* (2005), in which he started to assert his new interest in exploring the relationship between photography, portraiture, and death. In a series entitled *Aku Ingin Hidup Seribu Tahun Lagi* (I want to live another thousand years), which is borrowed from a seminal poem by Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar, Suwage presents numerous portrait paintings of dead figures. The works are intended as an homage both to the personages and to portrait photography and also as an idiom that relates to the act of remembering. On those paintings, all the dead figures are depicted from a head-shot perspective with a cigarette clipped on their left-hand fingers, identical to the iconic image of the romantic poet who died at the age of 27 due to tuberculosis.

The later propensity to deal with death continued in the series of works produced in the following years with the prominent appearance of the motifs of skulls, bones, and skeletons, as seen in Suwage's installations *Luxury Crime* (2007) and *Vox Mortis, Vox Orbis* (2009), as well as the motif of crows, seen in the *Dead Poet Society* (2007) and *Edgar Alan Poe* (2008), to cite some examples. While in some other works produced in 2008, such as *After Marcel Duchamp and Morimura Yasumasa, After Marina Abramovic, or After Jana Sterbak*, the corporeal appearance of the body, which was dominant in Suwage's previous self portraits and performance art series, has turned into the presence of mortality. He replaces the portrayal of the physically lively character of the performance artists with fleshless bodies. Construing the relationship between signs in the particular works, we are brought into the tension between performance art, as the most legitimate form of "live art," and the highlighted meaning of death and decay.

In Suwage's works, the use of the commonplace symbols and icons relating to death is deliberate. All visual elements that he uses in his works reflect his practice as a bricoleur. As already discussed in many essays, and exemplified by a large number of Suwage's works during different periods, such a tendency is intended as a strategy to examine, and re-examine, the limit of the circulation of meaning.⁵ Observing his long-term practice of appropriation, we are often faced by a challenge to unravel the mysteries of every single visual element in the works, as if they invite us to become a semiotician who has to investigate the complex eternal chains of signs.

DEATH RETURNING TO LIFE, AND BACK

The idea of death and decay, as understood in the laws of nature, is often seen as part of a linear or sequential progression that suggests everything will last to an end. Suwage, however, deals with this issue through a particular approach that is precisely against such a concept. He has been inspired by the ancient Eastern teaching in understanding death, namely the one relating to the concept of death not as something that suggests an end of living. In 2010, he created an installation showing piles of pitch-black human bones and skulls and golden crows, entitled *Siklus* (Cycle). Suwage admitted that he was inspired by the sky burial tradition of Tibetan Buddhists, which serves as a way to make human death more meaningful within nature. Sky burial is the ritual of exposing human corpses to other living creatures, namely vultures, in which the dead are “transformed” into another life. The mutual process suggests how the position of life and death is not placed in binary opposition. Rather, both concepts exist in an endless dialectic, and are complementary as “productive repetition.”

It is interesting to comprehend that the play of signs in most of Suwage’s practice tends to place the works in relation to a final destination, especially when we want to reflect on his recent works in *The End Is Just Beginning Is the End*. Suwage’s inclination to the existential questions may also represent his increasingly profound contemplation about his own life. However, I also like to mark this latest phase of work pertaining to life and death as his further investigation of his own method of recycling and play with symbols and icons.

For his New York exhibition, Suwage has prepared a series of works using unusual materials and found objects, namely sheets of zinc. In Suwage’s general practice this is not a new method. We can compare his use of found objects with how he “steals” other artists’ images too. Although there is always an excitement in the process of working with new materials, which he enjoys a lot (that way, he can fulfill his desire to be in a state of constant experimentation), the use of corroded zinc in this series is also very particular. Just like when he pinched hundreds of cigarette butts for his installations, or used tobacco juice as liquid paint for his paintings, Suwage always treats found objects in his works as a personal metaphor. As if they are mirrors or puddles of water that reflect his own images, ideas, memories, and imagination, the objects become part of a semiotic environment that is intertwined with the thematic aspects.

On the rusted sheets of zinc, Suwage painted images and fragments that make reference to his works on death. It is quite obvious that the images show Suwage’s personal meditation on the theme. For *Eros Kai Thanatos #3* (2010), Suwage combines the icons of Eros (life-guarding instinct, as depicted as the golden spiralling leaves) with those of Thanatos (instinct for destruction, as represented by part of a human thoracic skeleton) in a harmonious thread. Another painting, *The Kiss #3* (2010), which may remind us of the canonic work by Rodin, portrays the artist kissing a skull with a halo. If we think of this image as being about the interaction of a pair of opposed characters, then we might say that the presence of the artist is a personification of life as an “evil” entity, while the skull is depicted as the holy one. Here, we could also find the beauty in the encounter between life and death, as if they are intoxicated by each other’s love.

The End Is Just Beginning Is the End presents Suwage’s most recent exploration of the sculptural forms of the skeleton, seen particularly in the work *Happiness Is a Warm Gun* (2011). Showing a pair of skeletons having sexual intercourse, the work is constructed of sheets of zinc, which are shaped with paper-cut techniques and assembled into three-dimensional forms. Observing the works closely, we may find the two figures nearly approaching the actual structure of the human skeleton, except that they have tail bones. In a light box bubble attached to one of the skulls, the artist puts a illuminating scribble: “TERUSKAN! MAKIN SAKIT MAKIN BAIK!” (Keep going on! The more painful is the better!). Referring in its title to the famous Beatles song, which the artist is fond of, the work seems to encourage us to think about human desire and insanity, which to some extent have not obliterated the animalness in us.

An Offering to Ego #2 (2010), which is developed from Suwage’s installation work of the same title, portrays a black skeleton in a beach scene, reclined and immersed on the sand, suggesting the process in which death returns to the living nature. Another work in the series, *An Offering to Ego #3* (2010), represents the process where humanity has been haunted by questions and riddles in confronting death. In this piece, Suwage painted a black skull along with some floating and mixed lexicons he quotes from old Javanese, Latin, and English terms.

It is interesting to connect the above-mentioned paintings with another piece called *Landscape with Man and Skeleton* (2010), which portrays a man constructing, or deconstructing (?) parts of the scattered black bones and skeleton on the beach. Looking

at this particular painting, we might arrive at certain proposition that the painting *An Offering to Ego #2* is an aftermath of the construction process. Seen in this way, *Landscape with Man and Skeleton* suggests that the ultimate meaning of death is always socially constructed, that meaning is relative. We may become aware of how our definitions of death today exist not only in religious teaching, houses of worship, and religious sermons, but also in the hands of the popular mass media, modern medicine, and the state's political propaganda.

But, since there is no clarity as to whether the man is constructing or deconstructing the skeleton, we could also say that the scene in *An Offering to Ego #2* came before the dismantling process, and hence the presence of the man in the work *Landscape with Man and Skeleton* actually stands for a searching process for answers about death. Regardless of the sequence and above all the hypothesis, however, we still can say that, from the comparison of proportion and scale between the man and the skeleton in the painting, death remains a big unsolved question for humanity. As long as we live, we can only understand its outward manifestation. The meaning of death may only be solved through death itself.

To me, the presence of the two works, and this exhibition as a whole, reiterates Suwage's projection of his practice as a construction of chains of semiosis. Some of the works in this exhibition are sourced from existing images in the artist's previous works and documentation. The artist himself believes that there are still always unpredictable things coming out of the process of repeating, imitating, quoting, or transposing them into new works. To him, such an artistic strategy is necessary to emphasis his position in understanding the current world of abundant images, in which people always see what they have already seen before. True, in a world where everything is easy to transform into something else, our perception is being threatened by a massive amplitude of meanings which could make it difficult for us to choose what is most important. Suwage's act of recycling images and icons, in this context, should be understood as a preservation of memory. At the same time, the use of abandoned zinc sheets suggests a visionary choice to treat the readymade or found material as a textual substance that relates to idea of decay or demise. It is interesting to observe how in this exhibition both conceptual stances could congregate nicely with the artist's perspective on the eternal return of life and death.

Agung Hujatnika, a.k.a Agung Hujatnikajennong, was born in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia in 1976. After finishing his master's program at the Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bandung, Indonesia, he carried out curatorial residency programs in Australia and Japan. Since 1999, he has been curating exhibitions and contributing essays for various publications in Indonesia and abroad. Currently lecturing at his alma mater, he also works as the curator of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia. In 2009, he curated the 13th Jakarta Biennale – *Fluid Zones*.

NOTES

1. Jim Supangkat, "Exploring the Dark Sides of Life," a text for Agus Suwage's solo exhibition at Cemeti Art House, 1995, compiled in Enin Supriyanto (ed.), *Agus Suwage - Still Crazy after all These Years*, Yogyakarta, Studio Biru, 2010, p. 57.
2. Enin Supriyanto, "Still Crazy After all These Years," in Enin Supriyanto (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 451 – 460.
3. Aminudin TH Siregar, "Suwage's Proto Identity," curatorial essay for Agus Suwage's solo exhibition, *Pause, Re-play* at Galeri Soemardja, Bandung, 2004, in Enin Supriyanto (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 347.
4. Patrick D. Flores, "Transpose," in Enin Supriyanto (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 338.
5. Aminudin TH Siregar, *op.cit.*