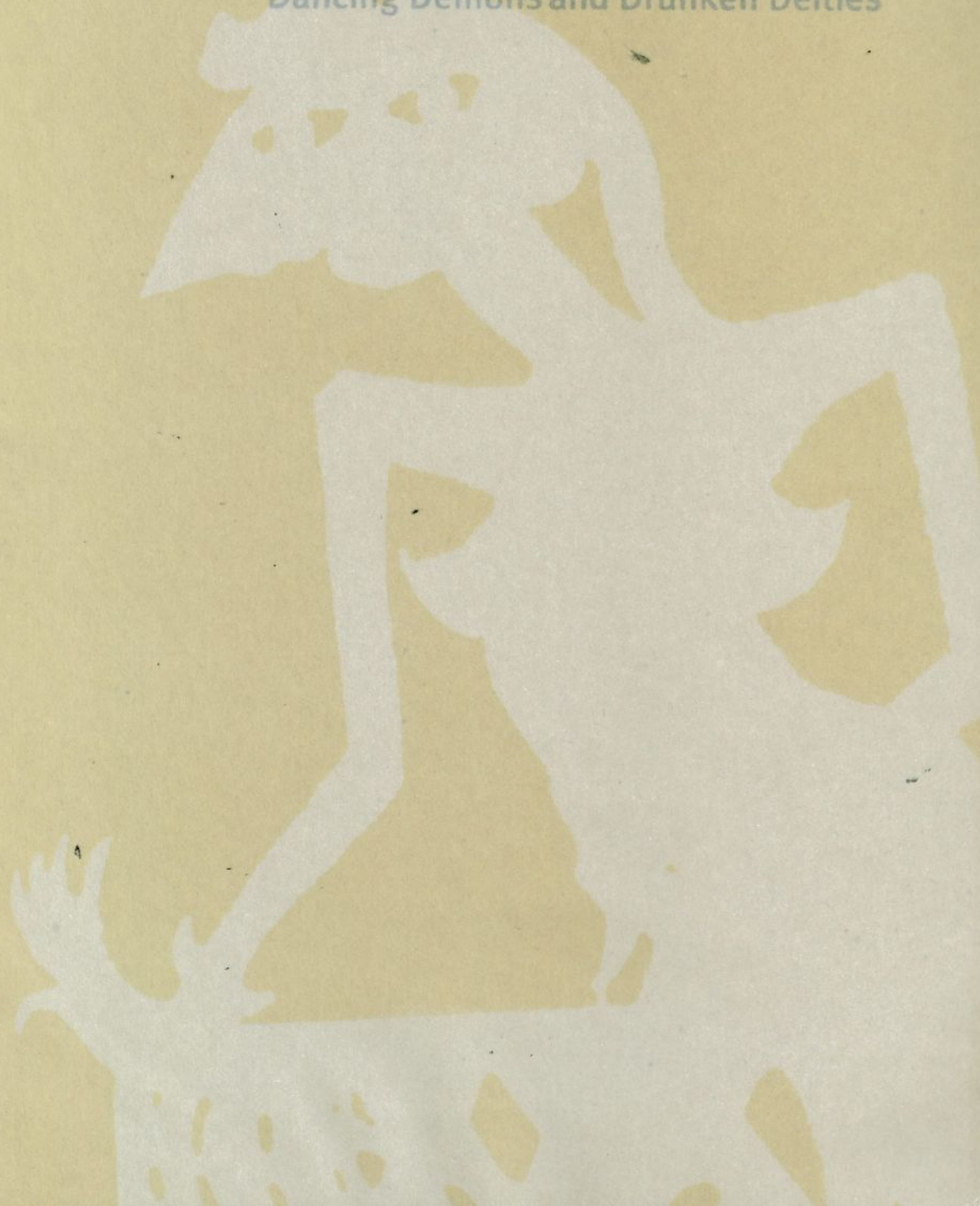


Asian Contemporary Artist
Solo Exhibition Series I

Heri Dono

Dancing Demons and Drunken Deities



and legend. Dono performed as *dalang* as he orchestrated and produced the *wayang* performance. He created grotesque, freakish, and comical shadow-puppet characters relating to the Batakese story of marriage between different castes and clans.²⁴ He felt that stories and tales from provincial places are as rich and imaginative as those from traditional Indonesian epics. But he did not exclude them altogether. In *The Drunkenness of Semar* (1995), Dono reinterpreted the deity in the *Mahabharata* epic, transforming Semar into *Supersemar* (a parody of Superman and local sweet-cake called *semar mendem*). The tipsy and jovial god-clown in the state of drunken stupor is symbolic of rulers and politicians whose sweet talk, oozing with charm and insincerity, often reflects their greed. Supersemar's wisdom/stupidity is intended as a critique of authority's abuse of power. Dono's double meaning of Supersemar relates to the acronym for the Decree of 11 March 1966, by which Sukarno was persuaded to sign a document bestowing wide powers on General Suharto (*Su, surat* = letter; *Per, perintah* = order, affirmation; *Se, selebas* = eleven; *Mar, Maret* = March).²⁵ In *Phartysemar* (1998), Dono referred to Semar's power in the exhibition of sound art, by selling jars of Semar's farts as weapons to fight evil forces. By taking the comical character of Semar a step further, Dono made the god's farts part of art.

There are affinities between Dono's play of surreal and macabre shadows with works by European artists such as Christian Boltanski's *Theatre d'Ombres* (*Theatre of Shadows*) (1984) and Annette Messager's *Eux et Nous, Nous et Eux* (*Them and Us, Us and Them*) (2000) in their exaggerations of monstrous forms projected on to the surrounding walls. Yet it is clear that Dono's references to Indonesian symbolism require contextual explanation similar to comprehension of referential works (16th-century ivory carvings of death and the armor of Albert of Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia ca.1526) and site specificity (Palace of the Popes, Avignon) when looking at installations by Boltanski and Messager, respectively.²⁶

In *Watching the Marginal People 2000* (2000, cat.no.4), 10 terrifying monstrous masks/faces with vicious teeth and bulging eyes move noisily from side to side. Through Javanese animism, Dono infused the belief that all things in the world have a soul. In this case, the monsters' shifting eyes, which are electronically operated, are metaphors of dark spirits, manipulation, and alienation resulting from rapid social transformation and globalization. Like Burisrawa, the greedy giant *wayang* character, these monsters watch and wait with hunger. Their victims are the underclass and the underprivileged from peripheral places. In *Kuda Binal* (*Wild Horse*) (1992), volunteers including children and gravediggers from Kleben in Yogyakarta replaced puppets in Dono's performance, which took place near the Sultan's palace complex. Inspired by traditional horse-trance dance (*jaran kepeng*) with bamboo dummy horses, Dono's version consisted of common people in gas masks and underwear worn outside their trousers performing a fire dance. The scenes contained contemporary events as well as mythology. The theme of the systematic destruction of nature by human greed and arrogance was shown through scenes of fighting battalions for the sake of peace. In the end, the dragon and *Tok Tok* (representative of slaughtered creatures) eventually destroyed the entire universe.²⁷

Fermentation of Mind (1994, cat.no.5) is a provocative work that comments on the tendencies of Indonesian authorities to use propaganda and censorship to implement national policies and to control the minds of the masses. Set in the gloomy space of a classroom or interrogating cell, nodding fiberglass heads (Dono's self-portraits) behind school desks bend rhythmically to the repetitive grainy sound emerging from broken speakers. These bald heads with closed eyes are propped up by metal rods and manipulated not by puppet strings but electronic circuits. Like some decapitated heads from war trophies on display, they are both sad and frightening. All things should have a soul, but from propaganda and mass media, these heads are empty of brains and are filled with selective information, dogmatic teaching, and chanting (*mantra*).²⁸ In contrast, *Ceremony of the Soul* (1995, cat.no.6) consists of nine fiberglass heads (also Dono's self-

fig.12 (p.21)
Christian Boltanski, *Theatre of Shadows*, 1984/2000, La
Boulé, Avignon, France

fig.13 (p.22)
Heri Dono, *Kuda Binal* (*Wild Horse*), 1992, performance,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

portraits) on stone torsos. The frontal posture of similar sculptures made of stone found near Borobodur sites suggests links with traditional Buddhist icons. When these stones were carved by gravediggers at the house of Dono's assistant, whose father was a soothsayer (*dukun*), Dono was informed that many spirits gathered to have a meeting there. This led Dono to entitle this work *Ceremony of the Soul*. The robotic and wide-eyed stares of these military decorated figures also relates to order, routine, and power. Wooden artificial limbs with no hands, lit by tiny light bulbs, and a hissing sound from tape recorders placed inside the carved torsos evoke a combination of supernatural, military, and electronic forces. The hum of shaking yellow fans also adds to the dramatic effect. Yellow has a significant meaning. In this case, it is not symbolic of Buddhism but signifies the color of the Golkar (Golongan Karya) Party. As Dono created this work for the "Unity in Diversity: Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries" exhibition held in Jakarta in 1995, he risked getting into trouble with the authorities, as it contained political implications. President Suharto and members of the Golkar Party who attended the opening of this international art event must have been informed about Dono's provocative installation.²⁹

In *Gamelan of Rumor* (1992-93, cat.no.7), emphasis is placed on sound installation, which is an integral part of a *wayang* performance. The concepts of *gamelan* as musical instruments providing harmonious balance between different worlds and playing for invisible guests are explored by Dono, whose orchestra plays magically without musicians. The human and the supernatural are connected by sound created by Dono's ingenious invention of electronically operated musical instruments. His experimental sound is intended to create notes that differ from those of the traditional *gamelan*. His low-tech engineering often breaks down—like humans and gods, who are at times on different wave-lengths. Commenting on high-tech communication systems, Dono wrote, "They often do not make sense, and also there is no meaning. The truth and falsities altogether become rumors and relatives." Dono described *Gamelan of Rumor* thus: "This work is the separation of truth from gossip, or fact from fiction. A discordant rhythm is set up which is like the soul of electricity within the machine."³⁰ Dono's concern about gossip and rumors can be related to Benedict Anderson's writing on direct speech, describing it as a mode of political communication playing "low" (*ngoko*) against "high" (*krama*) types of speech. *Ngoko* communication is direct, ephemeral, and hard to decipher, and is therefore appropriate for gossip and hearsay.³¹ The sounds from Dono's *gamelan* are analogous to the political rumors that are part of Indonesian life.

Diversity in Dono's work has allowed him to criticize these socio-political situation in Indonesia through metaphor and parody. *Flying Angels* (1996, cat.no.8) symbolizes hope and freedom in the Indonesian current political climate. *Wayang* puppet features are combined with found objects and the rural sounds of crickets and other insects. Ironically, these angels with mechanical hearts seem to be floating aimlessly with no destination. *Political Clowns* (1999, cat.no.9) consists of rows of fiberglass heads (Dono's self-portraits) similar to masked dramas (*wayang topeng*) linked to one another with electric circuits. These wires are connected to glass jars on the floor filled with urine energy. Like politicians, these clown's pale faces and permanent smiles cover the true personalities behind them. From tin speakers, a recorded male voice utters his love for money and desire to own the earth.³² Dono's performance also reflects the socio-political milieu. In *The Chair* (1993), masked performers pretending to be puppets dance with shadows on both sides of the screen. The puppeteer who orchestrates and pulls the strings finds out that he too is a puppet. In *Double M* (1997), half-naked performers with masks made of crackers and painted faces stun viewers with their fake breasts and erect penises. Through parody and satire, the performers criticize the monopolization of automobile manufacture by the Suharto family and Habibie's utopian dream of exporting airplanes and building nuclear plants in Java.

Transmission (Transmisi) (1999) consisted of an installation, video, and performance

fig.14 (p.24)
Heri Dono, *Double M*, 1997, performance at Biennale
Seni Rupa, Yogyakarta, Indonesia