

UPSIDE
DOWN
MIND



Heri Dono is a Yogyakarta based artist with an international reputation. In the last ten years he has been travelling extensively, on a creative odyssey in Asia, Europe and Australia and is widely recognized for his unique works depicting current issues in contemporary art. In the US he presented his works several times by joining collective exhibitions at Asia Society Gallery, New York. The exhibition entitled, *Upside-down Mind* presented at CP Artspace, Washington D.C. is his first major solo exhibition in the US.

Heri Dono who was born in Jakarta, Indonesia and now is at his 40's started his career in the late 1970s. By this time he invited controversy. It was by reason of his statement that art should be like the world of cartoon. He confirmed, this is an outcome of his insight questioning "what is art". He said the world of cartoon is interesting because it does not make sense.

Everything is alive on account of everything. Even objects have soul, spirit and feelings.

Based on the belief that invited controversy, Heri Dono came to a belief that the main purpose of art

activities is to explore the illogical world of the mind. When "twisted logic" is expressed in works of art, he is sure, it could trigger motives among people to resist the domination of the logic. He affirms that seeing reality through an upside down mind is meant for finding subversion of "the truth". Heri Dono's opinion in some way does make sense. Globalization has given birth to an atmosphere under the influence of developments in production systems, multinational economics, and the communication revolution. In this atmosphere, technology and systems of mass production affect both our perceptions and sensibilities as we try to understand virtually everything around us.

Thus all efforts to understand reality, without exception, are constrained by techno-industrial images, symbols, and signs which do not have the discovery of human values as their object, but rather function to ensure the continuity of commodity production in a smoothly operating economic system. Faced with this siege of our culture by such signs, artists have not revolted and totally dismissed the dominant images. Rather, they have deconstructed those images and symbols and used them as a subversive idiom in their



own works. Very often by seeing the images and symbols through an upside-down mind.

After exploring the world of cartoon, Heri Dono was captivated by the world of *wayang*, in the early 1980s. *Wayang* is Javanese traditional puppet performance. Despite he himself is Javanese, his encounter with *wayang* was not at all related to efforts that tend to find an exclusive identity.

Heri Dono is Javanese who grew up in metropolitan cities Jakarta and Yogyakarta. This is why his encounter with *wayang* includes a kind of *wayang* illiteracy. At least he faced an inside-outside dilemma when he tried to understand his so-called own culture.

Wayang gave him a new understanding on aesthetic experience. It was a kind of enlightenment. On one side he felt the aesthetics and the philosophy of *wayang* have a strong spiritual dimension. However on the other side *wayang* is strongly related to matters in everyday life. "*Wayang* made me think that there is a difference between art expression and cultural expression. I think representations in art tend to find the essence of nature while representations seen in

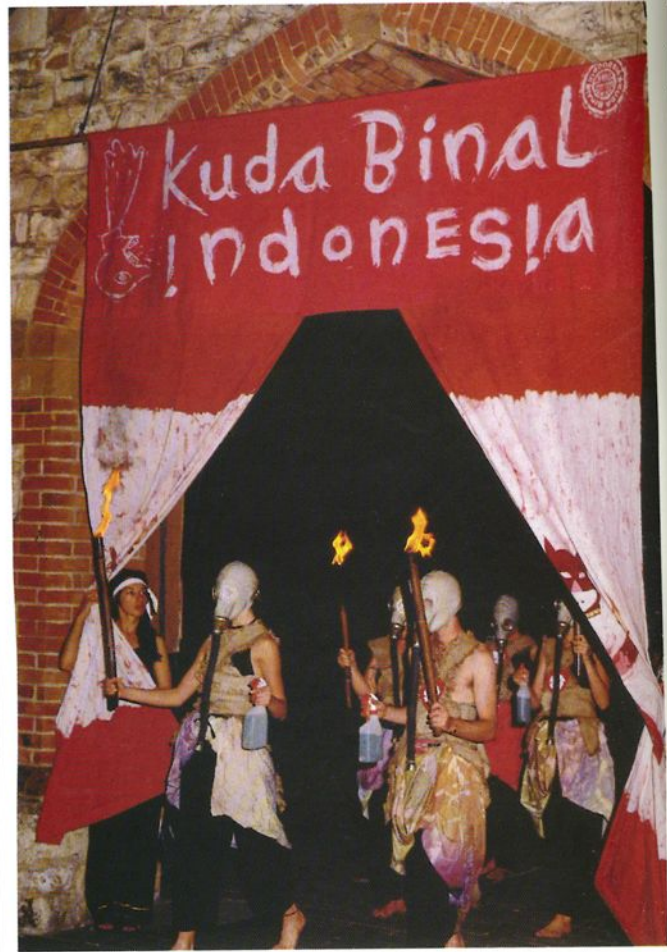


cultural expressions show efforts to communicate and the search of shared values that does not have to be absolute and eternal", he said.

Based on that insight, Heri Dono came to the belief that art expressions should be based on cultural matters and not on personal matters. He stated, "After seeing *wayang* more closely I came to a conclusion that aesthetical feelings link to collectivity and this is why I reacted to the common belief that a work of art should reflect the artist's feeling.

I feel something is not appropriate whenever I discover my works reflect only my sorrowful feelings. I felt it was not only this kind of feelings that should be expressed in a work of art, since what is important is experiencing feelings of joys as well as sorrows".

Wayang is not only a matter of making *wayang* puppets however it is indeed a sophisticated art practice. Similar to other puppet performances everywhere *wayang* performance includes musical and theatrical measures. Facing this fact Heri Dono felt the need to explore musical sensibility, theatrical sensibility besides visual sensibility. Here he started creating installation, mixed media works and doing performances.



Kuda Binal | 1994 (Adelaide)

Using new mediums after years of painting has brought Heri Dono to a new awareness on art and on medium of art. "Art and its medium is merely a vehicle," he said. "That is why the importance of art lies not in its beauty expressed mostly through the medium but in its content that reflects shared values." Medium for expressing art for Heri Dono is not a personal domain of artists. The medium in art expression is collectively built. The medium is not related to originality or individuality. It is a language hard to tell who actually invented it. In his opinion artists should build medium by taking things in their surrounding. The medium could be anything: an object, ready made, a sign, a symbol and even an idea. Through this practice artists can be considered as borrowing the medium from a culture.

By intuition Heri Dono went back to Javanese morality which is still widely believed by people. In Javanese moral ethics there is no tendency to find an absolute, eternal truth (in a philosophical sense). Fundamental premise of this Javanese morality is discussing "rightness" within the problematic of good and bad.

The search of rightness in an activity of thinking tend to explore the tensions in between good and bad. Customarily the thinking is based on *rasa* (sensibility) and *akal budi* (wisdom, prudence). The result is a sophisticated way to feel and to understand in depth the rightness in the sense not just knowing what is good and what is bad or what is right and what is wrong.

Rightness in Javanese morality is not a concept but a discourse. Understanding of the rightness is dependable to a negotiation process where representations, including representations in art, are discussed. The negotiation has a particular context and particular time frame. It is then a matter of course if the perception of rightness in this morality is unstable and continuously changes. A rightness could be different if seen in a different time frame.

Heri Dono's representations that mingle traditional and modern life realities reflect a vision that tries to see the relevance of that Javanese morality within modern world in Indonesiā. Basically because he witnesses how the understanding of rightness has lost

its negotiation process. How societal opinion on rightness is dominated by taking for granted techno-industrial logic that makes the understanding of rightness become insensitive and insensible.

Seeing Heri Dono's works more closely it is apparent that nearly all of his representation is a kind of self-criticism that celebrates paradoxical and oddness in his daily life. Mostly the obedience in executing conventions not completely understood in modern life. The self-criticism shows a strange positive optimism based on Javanese spiritualism. Through "black jokes" Heri Dono tries to understand the kind of reality.

Based on his belief that art practice has a close relationship with culture, Heri Dono gravitates towards making his work of art collaboratively in the sense he has the tendency to work with common people to create works. As if he wants to assure himself that he is doing a work that deals with culture in the sense avoiding doing works that merely tells personal artistic sentiments.

Based on that belief he explores communities



that are less developed in modern sense. As a result he found people who are still committed to the *rasa* and the *akal budi* that are the basis of Javanese traditional morality. These people do not realize what modernity is even in the slightest sense. Considering the ignorance, Heri Dono sees these traditional people survived in dealing with the modern world. Through twisted logic they can even make breakthroughs.

In doing the collaboration Heri Dono tends to make works out of thrown away things for example used radios or used Coca-Cola cans. About this, he stated that it is not significant to consider this tendency as showing his art.

It is more important to see the using of thrown away objects as a reflection of efforts of urban poor people using their artistic sensibility to survive in difficult economical situation. To Heri Dono the tendency to recycle junks and thrown away things among the poor people is an innovation that is based on artistic compassion. In his perceptive the innovation is a cultural matter. "The facts show the efforts of poor people using tradition to survive in difficult modern

situation. The creations show how tradition continuously makes breakthroughs not for the sake of artistic means but more for survival means", he said.

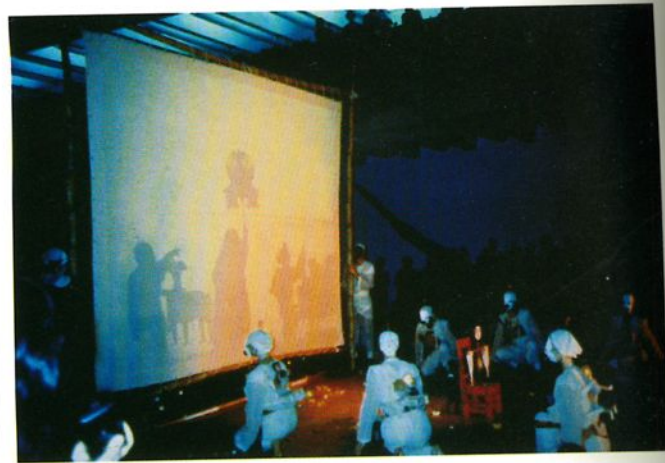
Up until now Heri Dono works with mechanics to develop machinery of his installation out of components of used transistor radios. He knows quite well the people who help him. "They work every day at their small radio shops repairing used transistor radios. There are thousands of them in Yogyakarta. After repairs they sell the radios cheaply to the grassroots," he said. The used radio business is again a cultural matter for Heri Dono. In his reading, he sees the mechanics have made devices out of invaluable things and by selling them, they provide information and entertainment among the grassroots. This attitude indeed is far different from behavior of consumerist society that easily throws away things like clothes, televisions, furnitures, even cars that actually is still good and useful.

It is a matter of fact in traditional Javanese society every person is a craftsman since they make their own utensils. However they also make work of

arts. The term for doing this kind of work is *penciptaan*. The direct interpretation of the term *penciptaan* is creating. However, seeing it more precisely the term has a unique meaning. The word *penciptaan* derived from a term *cipta* that means imagination, hopes, fantasy, dreams, also communal idealism relating to shared values in daily life.

Correspondingly *penciptaan* means making dreams, fantasy and idealism become tangible or visual, through the capacity of hands by enforcing *rasa* (a kind of intuition) and the feeling of beauty that goes beyond sensation. This artistic practice is far from expressing opinions or making statements. Related to this activity, art in Javanese is *kagunan* that points out an activity of emitting feelings expressing the beauty of moral ethics. The term *kagunan* derived from the term *guna* which means an insightful idiosyncrasy of a person.

Perceiving that artistic sensibility, Heri Dono asked the common people to collaborate with him in making works of art. The people who actually are craftsmen accepted graciously the invitation. In the



process of collaboration, these people do not just help Heri Dono doing the production. They also give him advises and ideas. At the end, together they created works that not only show Heri Dono's convictions. The works also show surprisingly dreams, fantasies, hopes and beliefs of the poor urban in facing today's reality. Considering this Heri Dono's collaboration project opens the opportunity of including societal dreams, idealism, hopes and fantasies. The inclusion will enrich Heri Dono's representation of today's reality.

Jim Supangkat | *curator*

