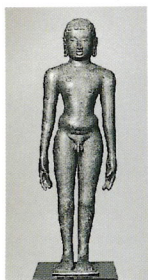


TRADITIONS

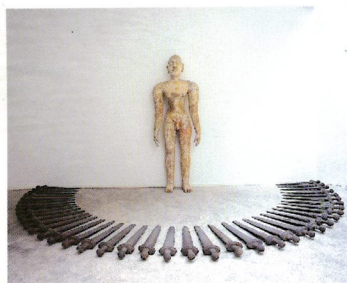
CONTEMPORARY ART

IN ASIA

TENSIONS



1. *Tirthankara*, Karnataka or Tamil Nadu, India, 7th–early 8th century, copper alloy, H. 26.7 cm (10½ in.), Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, Asia Society, New York.



2. **N. N. Rimzon**, *The Inner Voice*, 1992, resin fiberglass, marble dust, and cast iron, H. 207 cm (81½ in.), Foundation for Indian Artists, Amsterdam.



3. **Heri Dono**, *Ceremony of the Soul*, 1995, detail of installation showing stone and plastic figure, H. approx. 90 cm (35 in.), courtesy of the artist.

and with what effects the voice of “Other” can be heard. The question is that once raised by literary theorist Gayatri Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak?”²² Letting the native speak may imply various intentions. On the one hand, it allows the choked discourses of domination to be enunciated. On the other hand, sometimes the silent gaze of an inner voice is preferable to sound.

In his essay “Archetypes of a Lost Humanity,” critic R. Nandakumar comments on **N. N. Rimzon**’s remarkable skill in preventing his sculptures from becoming self-centered.²³ Rimzon’s preference for installation helps him to keep away from the head-to-foot verticality of the image which is a natural aspect of the viewer’s projected self. The play between mental space and real space becomes significant in Rimzon’s interpretation of archetypes of a lost humanity. Rimzon believes that “art should operate in a cultural/political context and the artist has a role in the society.” But he does not take the role of the socially committed artist who uses didactic narrative or political allegory. Rather, he uses what he calls “transformation technique” in his installations. In such works, he explains, “art becomes ‘iconlike,’ like a Krishna image which is transformed into a spiritual object through chanting.”²⁴

In *The Inner Voice* (1992), Rimzon expands this mental space by juxtaposing traditional Indian objects and decentralizing the concept of unified vision. The key figure, a standing nude in a contemplative pose, is derived from the spiritual deity of Jain sculpture. Rimzon’s intention in linking his work to Jain orthodoxy and the teachings of Vardhamana Mahavira (Great Hero), the twenty-fourth Tirthankara and a contemporary of the Buddha, is to draw attention to the core Jain doctrine which forbids harming any living creature.²⁵ This doctrine is summarized by the phrase *ahimsa paramo dharma* (“non-violence is the supreme religion”). One Jainist sect, the Digambara (“sky-clad”), advocated total nudity, a position that is echoed in the refined forms of its sacred sculptures. In Rimzon’s work, the central figure is surrounded by cast-iron

weapons; a symbol of nonviolence enclosed by tools that cause injury and harm. The mental space moves the viewer into the expanded field of cultural/political contexts. The swords signify violence which is ingrained in Indian life. But, at the same time, they are like metal rays that cannot penetrate the invisible space that protects the sacred image.

These contradictory signifiers are Rimzon’s comment on the violence that resulted in the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. When a spasm of violence sparked across the nation, Hindu nationalism and mayhem could not be contained.²⁶ Explosions and killings occurred at random. Men on the streets were stripped bare to verify that they were circumcised, and many who were, were killed. But the enforced nudity also recalled the purist nudity associated with Jainist nonviolence, a major influence on the political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. In echoing such multiple associations, Rimzon’s *Inner Voice* suggests the possibility of cultural hybridity. In addition, its silence evokes inner chanting. By inviting the viewer to listen and to travel the inward journey, Rimzon raises racial/class/religious/political issues that shift constantly in multifaceted India.

If the closed-eyed figure in *The Inner Voice* suggests introspection, then the faces in Rimzon’s sculptures *Three Heads on a Shelf* (1984) and *Man in a Chalk Circle* (1985) signify the opposite attitude. They scrutinize the viewer with a questioning gaze, not revealing any aspect of the self or a particular individual but offering instead the piercing look of anonymous marginalized people. The works of Yogyakarta-based artist **Heri Dono** also focus on the gaze, but it may be that of the *burisrawa* (literally, the greedy and rapacious giant in a *wayang* shadow play) as well as that belonging to indigenous people. Although Dono declares that he is not interested in politics, his sculptures make clear that, like Rimzon’s works, they function in and refer to a complex cultural and political context. Dono’s *Gamelan of Rumour* (1992), *Watching Marginal People* (1992), and *Fermentation of Minds* (1993), to name three examples, each comment to varying degrees on the tendency of Indonesian authorities to use propaganda

and censorship to implement national policies and to control the minds of the masses.²⁷

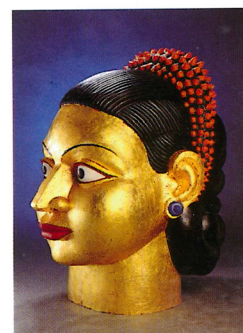
Dono views art as a spiritual activity and claims that visual art is his religion.²⁸ His artistic language is a conglomeration of painting, sculpture, electronic installation, and *wayang* performance. By virtue of the fact that these eclectic art activities sometimes involve the participation of the local community, Dono creates an alternative public arena for critical dialogue. This tendency cuts against the grain of the imagined community or nation of Indonesia, which takes as its motto "Unity in Diversity." Dono incorporates traditional Indonesian art and performance as a way of conveying the fear and instability underlying this fictional national identity. For example, his *Kuda Binal* (Wild Horse), 1992, a performance based on a traditional Indonesian horse-trance dance called *jaran kepang* and staged in a square outside the court in Yogyakarta, involved local people from Kampung Kleben in costumes with props and tear-gas masks. Various scenes in the performance depicted the systematic destruction of nature by human greed and arrogance. Dono's visions of chaos explicitly contradicted national ideologies of harmonious unity.²⁹ The trance dancing and flower offerings he recreated are traditional practices now considered sinful by the Indonesian state department of religion.

In Dono's installation *Ceremony of the Soul* (1995), the static frontal posture of the stone figures is reminiscent of the Buddha images on the Borobudur. Dono's selection of stones found near this sacred site further demonstrates his intention to adapt traditional materials for specific meaning in contemporary life. These stone images have fiberglass heads and wooden arms and are positioned in neat rows that suggest obedience to a system of discipline and order. At first glance, each one seems to embody the spirit of tradition and to revive the splendor of the past. But as the viewer discovers the assortment of military decorations, radios, lights, and tape recorders attached to these sculptures, their meaning begins to shift. The wide-eyed stare becomes hypnotic and disturbing. Serenity and tranquility turn to authority and threat.

Watchful eyes are everywhere. Through Dono's intervention, these traditional stones have been transformed into icons of power and repression. The eerie mood of surveillance and threat reflect the political condition of Indonesia, in which a concentration of power in the capital of Jakarta frequently results in the marginalization or alienation of peripheral areas, such as Yogyakarta, Aceh, Irian Jaya, and East Timor. Unlike the silence in Rimzon's *The Inner Voice*, Dono's installation is accompanied by the continuous hum of low-hanging yellow fans.³⁰

People who hold subordinate positions in society are expected to be silent. But often, even when people are repressed, they still find ways to communicate. Tensions embedded in the gaze of the subaltern are both concealed and revealed in works by **Ravinder G. Reddy** and Navin Rawanchaikul. The wide-eyed frontal stare in Reddy's gilded heads, for instance, is simultaneously sensual, mesmerizing, and challenging. Reddy's extreme simplification of form recalls not only Indian temple sculptures but also ancient Egyptian and Etruscan stone carvings.³¹ The splay-nosed, thick-lipped, almond-eyed attributes of various Indian ethnic and religious groups relate to the hierarchical division of society into castes (*varna*) according to an early Sanskrit text, the Rig Veda. In Reddy's heads, ethnicity and "breed" (*jati*) are made intentionally ambiguous, embalmed within a universalizing golden yellow surface. Yet, their massive and simplified features, both heraldic and heroic, suggest unspoken codes of conduct that rank members of society on a scale from polluted to pure.

Reddy's gilded and elaborately coiffed heads imply an idealized purity but they also recall the marks of inferiority within India's complex caste system, the heads of prostitutes, bonded laborers, untouchables, and people from tribal communities. Many of Reddy's sculptures represent females, in themselves a social group treated as subservient in Indian culture.³² Women in India cannot directly approach God but must worship through their religious teacher, or *swami* (lord), the "twice-born" man who mediates their access to God. Ironically, while many ancient deities are "imprisoned" behind display cases and



4. **Ravinder G. Reddy**, *Head IV*, 1995, gilded and painted polyester-resin fiberglass, 120 × 74 × 103 cm (47 1/4 × 29 1/8 × 40 1/2 in.), courtesy of the artist.