

SMA

# – Idästä tuulee –

NÄKÖKULMIA ASIAN NYKYTAITEESEEN

## – Wind from the East –

PERSPECTIVES ON ASIAN CONTEMPORARY ART



## Heri Dono

born in 1960 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

The influences of traditional shadow theatre and Western animation are evident in Heri Dono's installations, in which anything is possible. Heri Dono is one of Indonesia's best-known artists. His works often have genderless puppet-like figures that form grotesque robot armies and question dominant political institutions and people's habit of adapting and adjusting to circumstances. For the artist, angels symbolise imagination and freedom of opinion. They are free to fly almost anywhere, as in the piece *The Angels Fallen from the Sky* (2004).

Using irony and absurd humour, Dono draws out the most sensitive of subjects from behind symbolical shadows and masks. Control of the masses and blind faith in the authorities are Heri Dono's topics in *Political Clowns* (1999). It has rows of soulless human heads, standing on the ground on stick-legs and hiding behind a mask. With a permanent false smile on their faces, these anonymous, milk-white clowns stare ahead with large eyes. Their empty fibreglass heads suck urine from glass jars on the floor.

Heri Dono completed his art studies at the ISI, Indonesia Institute of the Arts. He has also studied under the *wayang kulit* master Sikit Sukasman. Heri Dono's works have been shown in various countries around the world in numerous solo exhibitions, including Norway, Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom, and in group exhibitions in, for example, the *Cities on the Move* exhibition in Helsinki in 1999, at the Venice Biennial in 2003 and the São Paulo Biennial in 2004.

Satu Metsola

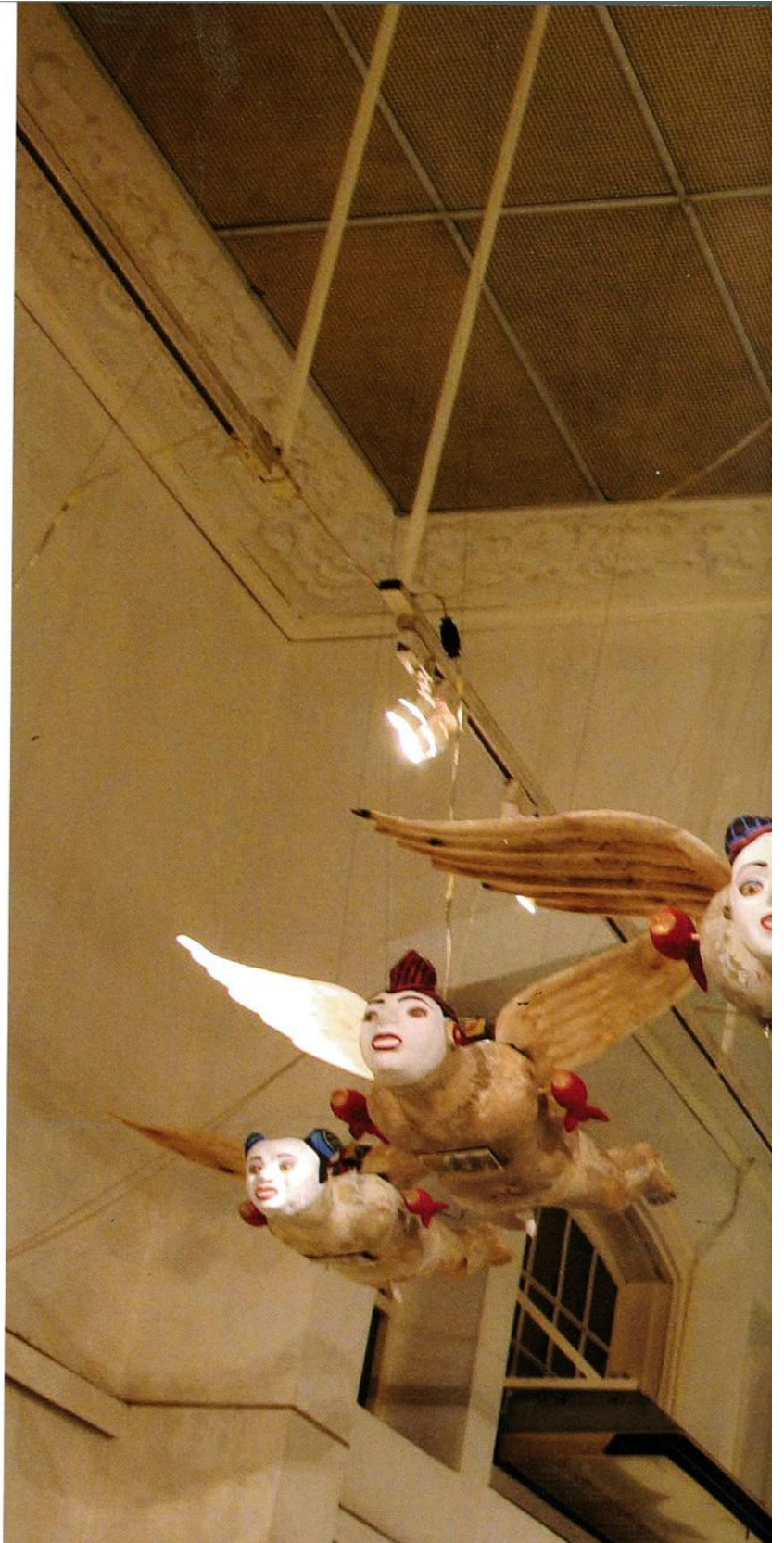


Heri Dono: Political Clowns, 1999

Heri Dono



Heri Dono:  
The Angels Fallen from the Sky,  
2004











Heri Dono: Clinic Primata, 2001  
(yksityiskohta / detail) >



Heri Dono: Shock Therapy for Political Leaders, 2004





## Watching the logic through an upside-down mind

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First of all, I have read and seen for myself how a society's system of thinking can be engineered using ideas expressed as their opposite. If we examine the situation in Indonesia at present, the appropriate metaphor might be that of viewing the process of creation of a glass painting, in which the artist must create a mirror image of the picture he wants to portray, because the picture will be viewed from the other side of the glass. Only by creating a mirror image will the artist present a true picture to the viewers.

This reversal of the truth through a process popularly known as "twisted logic" is an interesting phenomenon, in which the truth as defined by normal logic is reversed or contradicted, but the result is nonetheless a version of the "truth."

In the dominant culture of Indonesia, almost all issues are characterized by dualism, paradox and ambiguity. In Indonesian culture, humanity lives in animated cartoon world in which people are little more than cardboard figures. Basically, the driving spiritual force in the society is animism. The fundamental principle of animism, the idea that every object has a soul, is reflected in the world of animated fantasy.

In an animated cartoon, each and every object can move and become alive. A chair can get up and run, a drop of water can smile; a tree can dance or even fly. The most unlikely events, events that would seem impossible in the real world are commonplace in an animated cartoon. Similarly, events that would seem impossible in the real world are commonplace in Indonesia. Anything is possible. There are many examples. For instance, a president could stay in power for 30 years without accumulating a single cent in personal wealth. A large individual can mysteriously disappear without a trace from prison, and with even less difficulty, enormous sums of money can mysteriously disappear from a bank. Perhaps, in this case, the disappearance is facilitated by the relatively small size of the banknotes compared to the size of a human being.

The phenomena that I have described above are commonplace, proving that absurdity represents its own form of the truth. However, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between those events that really happened and those that are just rumor. It was particularly difficult to distinguish reality from falsehood in the mass media or educational institutions, particularly under the Suharto regime, when the strength of prohibition and censorship were so strong that the only way to determine the truth was to witness an event as it happened, from close up. During this period, news reports were routinely edited to accord with the interests of the government. During this period, the favorite expression of the power holders was: "In the interest of National Stability." In this fashion, life became increasingly convoluted.

*Political Clowns* (1999) refers to how many people view the politicians as clowns or jesters and see their political posturing as empty rhetoric. But they are afraid of the military and the threat of violence. At the current moment democracy is a luxury that one dreams of.

Also I wanted to talk about how many of the politicians are concerned with obtaining position and power but after they obtain the "Chair" they don't care about serving the people. In the installation *Shock Therapy for Political Leaders* (2004) a hammer hits the bell which repre-

sents the brain of the politicians who hang upside down.

I have worked with many other individuals in the creative process, most of whom were "ordinary people." The installation art and the performances that I have created, including my version of the *wayang*, have all involved the input of a wide variety of individuals, from friends involved in electronics, mechanics, construction, crafts and various arts, and others, including *becak* drivers and grave diggers.

The process of relating these works has been particularly interesting when it has involved intense interaction in the form of a mutual dialog. Artistic paradigm and expression unique to the locality became part of the work. If I create a work of art using either simple or advanced technology, my purpose is not to display the technology used. Rather, I am inspired by my conception of animism. The theme or basic concept behind the creation of a work of art, whether innovative or inventive, is born out of personal situation and the need for expression. I do not use voice or movement in painting, but I do it in installation art, performances and videos. The art that I create is not merely an exploration in creative aesthetics. I also endeavor to awaken a new awareness in my audience through an interactive process.

With *Clinic Primata* (2001) I wished to speak about the decay logic that comes about as a result of confusion and indecision while moving between "modern" and "traditional" modes of thinking.

Themes involving society, politics, violence, militarism and other similar issues are important for me. I recognize that an artist occupies a unique position as a witness of the period in which he or she works. This role is particularly important because in Indonesia education serves the purpose of perpetuating ignorance rather than enlightening the nation. In the Indonesian educational system, concepts such as intellectual freedom and personal development have no place. Education is a means for accumulating ignorance.

Through an interactive relationship, the process of creating a work of art becomes the medium for viewing the differences between various paradigms of thought and the means by which a non-academic orientation can provide enrichment in an informal context that nonetheless allows for the spread and socialization of the concept to the ordinary viewer. In this develops a prospect of life in the formation of the structure of the middle class, a class that is still weak in Indonesia.

In the process of creating of a work of art, I often use traditional elements. My audience is often intimately familiar with these elements. However, these elements are not placed in the structure defined by traditional patrons of the arts. Rather, these elements are used because they are more capable of representing a dialectical local expression and communicating the individual perceptions of the artist. In this regard, tradition forms a vital catalyst in an essential, ongoing cultural dialog. In this light, tradition and the traditional arts are not something to be preserved in a museum. Rather, I believe that tradition and traditional arts are capable of being developed and created.

In the Brinjarjo Market in Yogyakarta, traders sell old electronic goods side by side with the sellers of traditional medicines. If I want to purchase the electronic goods the seller will ask me how many kilograms I would like to buy. In my book, these electronic goods can be categorized as traditional. In my opinion, the problem of contemporary art can be traced semiotically through a traditional methodology. For example, in the traditional Chinese system of treatment, reflexology, if the patient has a headache or other disorder elsewhere in his or her body, the treatment takes place through the nerve centers located in his foot. It is generally acknowledged that contemporary art, particularly contemporary from Asia, is ruled by a different paradigm to that which governs Western culture. For example, in the philosophy of perspective in the West, the distinction between the Subject and Object is clearly drawn. In the philosophy of perspective in Asia, there is no such distinction. In the Mandala system, the subject is assumed to all pervasive.

*Museum of Ethnology* (2001) looked at the habit western intuitions have of placing artist from the third world in ethnographic and anthropology shows. One way I wanted to do this was by making my own ethnographic museum and look at the ways which these museums operated to enforce the idea of colonization.

The significance of the difference in the two approaches is represented in a concrete fashion by the design of the Borobudur temple, or by the layout of the city of Yogyakarta, which places the Kraton both physically and spiritually at the center of the consciousness of the com-



munity. The installation art and several of the performances in which I have been involved are also inspired by a Mandala-type perspective. As an artist, I recognize that an artist plays an important role in society as a social and political control, representing a viewpoint that may be at odds with that of the government's.

My work, *The Angels Fallen from the Sky* (2004) was inspired by the Flash Gordon stories, create long before Neil Armstrong flew to the moon in the Apollo 11 spacecraft and took his first step on the moon. This proves that the human imagination and inspiration can be inspired by symbols and events dating to well before the period in which the artist operates. For me, the angels are an extremely personal symbol of freedom of conscience, replacing the *Garuda* symbol that has been used as a symbol of collective ideology and propaganda to prevent individuals from developing their intellectual and personality freely.

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Vancouver, Canada, 17 November 2006

**Heri Dono**



Heri Dono: Museum of Ethnography, 2001