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HERI DONO

THE WORLD AND I

In 1990, Heri Dono attended an artist-residency program in Switzerland—his first trip abroad—which became deeply imprinted in his mind. While in Europe, Dono saw, and was struck by, Bruce Nauman's *Shadow Puppets and Instructed Mime* (1990), in which moving images are projected onto linen and suspended sculptural objects, and by Jonathan Borofsky's "Hammering Man" series (1979–2002) of large-scale kinetic sculptures that portray the silhouette of a laborer. It was in Switzerland that Dono started his acclaimed "Wayang" projects, which reinterpret traditional Indonesian puppet theater. Ever since, he has believed that variations on *wayang* can be a global alternative art form.

"The World and I" was the Yogyakarta-based artist's first retrospective in Indonesia, held at Art:1 New Museum, Jakarta. The exhibition displayed 86 installations, sculptures, paintings and drawings, created between 1984 and 2014. Among the newest works on view was "The Odyssey of Heridonology" series (2014), comprising ten panels that covered the curving wall of the museum's third floor. These realist paintings depict a narrative panorama of Dono's artistic evolution, with references to the grotesque *wayang* puppets and figures from his installations and performances.

Thematically, Dono is interested in cultural relativity. Are there higher and lower cultures? Can cultural values be compared? Such nuances are reflected in his work, which juxtaposes the progressive and the traditional, the positivistic and the metaphysical, the secular and the religious, and experience and theory.

Dono's view on nonabsolute cultural values is what makes "Heridonology" relevant. "Heridonology" is an eclectic mix of images and contradictions, such as angel figures adorned with mechanical and weapon-like contraptions (*Angels Falls from the Sky*, 2008), or gorillas reading and writing studiously (*Learning About the World*, 2008). This focus on nonconformity also applies to the artist himself: in his works Dono often depicts his alter-ego as the "Dono-saurus," a monster that does not fear critics.

"Heridonology" is none other than paralogy—a movement against an established way of reasoning. Dono transforms *wayang* puppets into mutants and vice versa, thus interchanging traditional and modern art. By exploring dialectics of tradition and modernity, Dono wishes to expose the critical elements of both paradigms.

In a journal entry from the mid-1980s on display at the exhibition, Dono questions the definition of society. Here, he underlines two types of collectivities: the mechanic and the harmonic. The former refers to a technologic and individualistic society, and the latter to a community bound by common values and tradition.



For Dono, tradition is not something that can be taken for granted. Yet, at the same time, he feels that culture can always be reinvented. Furthermore, Dono believes in the ability of an artist to process and "ferment" ideas, and to use them to contribute to, as well as to critique, culture.

With his pluralistic views on culture, Dono rebels against the idea of *wayang* being a cultural canon. He creates performances that deviate from traditional *wayang* shows, eschewing typical origins—historical epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—and, instead, presenting alternative stories. One example is *Wayang Legenda* (1988), which depicts his original interpretation of an Indonesian folk tale, in which a wooden statue of a beautiful girl transforms into a human, marries the king and gives birth to twins, who later marry each other in an incestuous union. The "post-tradition" atmosphere of Yogyakarta, arguably the center of modern Javanese culture, provides much inspiration for Dono's eclectic expression.

Dono uses found materials in *Gamelan Goro-goro* (2001), which comprises a *kenong* (a gong-like instrument) made from *becak* (rickshaw) scraps and three yellow buckets connected to one another by bamboo chutes. Its pseudo-mechanic rhythm, and the sound of water pouring through the bamboo, transforms *Gamelan Goro-goro* into a sound-art piece.

In Dono's works, *wayang* is reborn through modern paradigms. He sees a mental connection between *wayang* and contemporary animation, as well as between Indonesian humor and Hollywood slapstick of the silent era. To Dono, tradition always means "rebirth," or rediscovering culture and reinterpreting it in relation to the present. Yet, it is impossible to categorize and analyze his works entirely by *wayang*, as he is constantly attempting to go beyond and deconstruct tradition.

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