

40. See Jose Manuel Tesoro, "Open But Not Shut," *Asiaweek* (2 June 2000), pp.36-37. For writing on Indonesian culture of fear and the post-Suharto era, see Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, *Stability and Unity: On a Culture of Fear* (Bangkok: Forum Asia, 1995) and Adam Schwarz and Johnathan Paris (eds.), *The Politics of Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Singapore: The Council of Foreign Relations, 1999), respectively.
41. Permadi, a soothsayer, has said that when Habibie became president, he did not have the *wahyu*, or divine blessing. Dono explained that the dragon is the Chinese symbol indicating the rise of Asians in the year 2000. The Garuda with shoes falling down the volcano signifies Indonesian authority. In this case, the mythological figure could mean the army divisions supporting General Wiranto and General Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law.
42. For discussion on *ngeledek* in recent Indonesian art, see Martinus Dwi Marianto, "Teasing Through Art," *AWAS! Recent Art from Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 1999), pp.42-53.
43. Suharto denied this accusation, stating that he hardly has any money. On 8 August 2000, the Head of the State Prosecutor's Office Barman Zahir put forward a file and indictment to charge Suharto with violations of the law related to corruption and abuse of power. If proven guilty, he could face life imprisonment. See Anthony Spaeth, "Don't Cry for Suharto," *The Time* (19 June 2000), pp.18-19.
44. Executed shortly before Suharto's resignation, Dono informed that in this work he wanted to be most direct, as there was no room for humor.
45. Terry McCarthy, "Democrat...or Boss?" *The Time* (17 July 2000), pp.34-35; and Jose Manuel Tesoro, "Defiant Under Fire," *Asiaweek* (4 August 2000), pp.32-33. This article quoted Indonesian political analyst Soedjati Djiwandono as saying that, "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is still king."
46. Roeslan Abdulgani, "Waiting on Wahid Is Not Easy," *The Indonesian Observer* (11 August 2000), p.5.
47. I take this opportunity to thank the Japan Foundation for this kind invitation. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ms. Yasuko Furuichi and her assistants for their tireless efforts in realizing this project.
48. I would like to thank Dr. Vishakha Desai, vice-president of the Asia Society, New York, for her kind advice on Indian and Indonesian religious and court architecture. Discussion on this topic at Villa Serbelloni by Lake Como was most exhilarating. I also wish to extend my thanks to Mr. David Elliott, director of Moderna Museet, Stockholm, for his stimulating contribution on Dono's work during our discussion in Amsterdam on 15 July 2000.
49. Helen Ibbitson Jessup, *Court Arts of Indonesia* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1990), pp.105-123.
50. I would like to thank my son, Pirawuth Poshyananda, for introducing me to hundreds of Pokemon monsters. Logic and reality have never been the same since.

After celebrating nearly 20 years of political euphoria in literature, art, theatre and experimental films in Indonesia, criticism has started to surface in the year 2000. Criticism says that political works of art praised by a group of critics and scholars were trapped in a kind of intellectualization of art. In this opinion then art is misused towards political goals and as a consequence of that, the work of art is placed in an insignificant position. This commentary also finds fault with art criticism that applies a contextual approach that only considers criticism as an observation of the social and political content of the work of art.

Also with this the reasoning why Indonesian artists have been joining regional art exhibitions in the last 10 years has been assaulted. The attack considered regional exhibitions as the cause of political intentions in Indonesian contemporary art. The criticism sees this occurrence as being related to the fact that curators of regional exhibitions tend to select works that base the idea of Indonesian art as a political commentary, and perceives this as showing a stereotypical view of First World curators towards the Third World.

The emergence of such criticism probably is being shown as an outgrowth of trying to find meaning and value in the ongoing tendency in Indonesian art. Critics who have been involved in discussing these issues originally believed in such theories as postmodernism, post-structuralism and pluralism.

While observing this criticism, I discussed the matter with Heri Dono because his work has been the target of this type of criticism. Dono is a prominent Indonesian contemporary artist whose work tends to explore social and political issues. He is interpreted as an artist who excels beyond other artists since he is the only artist who steps towards entering the world art forum and, to date, has joined many regional exhibitions. Today, he spends most of his time joining art events throughout Asia including Australia as well as in Europe and the United States. He has rarely had a chance to exhibit his work in Indonesia itself.

I was surprised to find that Heri Dono is not at all upset by this but even agrees with the criticism. He feels that "political works have become repetitious, and artists who have done this kind of work were seen as too political in the sense that they tend to force political issues as the only matter that should be considered. They do not give the public a chance to talk about other matters not only in their own work but also in other artists' work."

Heri Dono does not deny that his work also explores social and political issues. Nevertheless, the issues he raises in his work, should be considered as cultural matters since the critical views shown in social and political matters, which he touches upon in his work, are expressions that show everyday problems which are faced by people that have cultural significance.

Heri Dono is of the opinion that both art and political life need some aspects of freedom so as to be able to find ways to survive the continuous changes that we face in society. He believes that the two different worlds mingle within culture so as to be able to achieve their dynamic function, as he states: "We have witnessed many political movements that have had their origins through cultural awareness, which at the very beginning was discussed in cafés by artists and philosophers."

It is quite clear that Heri Dono perceives all matters to have a cultural basis. In fact, critics who attack the idea of political euphoria also criticize this perception. Critics call it the "intellectualization of art." This particular criticism is apparent in the opinion of Ahmad Sahal, a prominent young critic of literature.

In his article "Cultural Studies and the Extricating of Aesthetics," Ahmad Sahal states that political euphoria in Indonesian art shows the influence of "cultural studies."<sup>1</sup> Cultural studies can be explained as "the" platform to worldwide discourse developed in the last 30 years that shows the resistance to cultural hegemony.

Ahmad Sahal saw three basic thoughts in the discourse. The first, opposing the

culture that has been taken for granted because that culture is actually constructed by a powerful group of elite's. The second, liberating the knowledge of people from the dominating knowledge of the elite's. The third, celebrating plurality of culture.

Sahal sees thoughts under the label of cultural studies as having influenced scholars in Indonesia. Due to this particular influence, critics and scholars considered works of art and literature merely as cultural texts and social documents. The aim of cultural studies is known to find facts and realities that show cultural hegemony and domination committed by elite groups. In reading such works, critics and scholars alike consider political correctness as the most significant matter. As a consequence, whether the works are good or not is overlooked.

Sahal is of the opinion that political euphoria emerged in Indonesian arts through these writings. This political euphoria tends to express not only political matters but also cultural matters that show hegemony. Ahmad Sahal's opinion, if not indirectly, has unveiled Heri Dono's tendencies and reasoning why his works could enter the world art forum. As far as I know Dono is indeed the only artist in Indonesia who clearly considers art as a cultural matter, since his work also shows a resistance towards cultural hegemony.

Heri Dono does not deny Sahal's criticism. Nevertheless, I am not sure whether his opinions really are influenced by thoughts which emerged in cultural studies or even if he is a follower of this type of thought, since most of his opinions are based on his own insight.

To Heri Dono, art is the only media for the expression of ideas that in fact have the capacity to accommodate human sensibilities, where the specificity of art as a media is such that no other media has this ability. Nevertheless, he is sure that the content of his work is always a cultural matter and not an artistic one. Dono thinks of it in the following way: "If we consider culture as a piece of cake and art expression as a part of that cake, creating works of art should not be considered as slicing the cake. Since cutting the cultural cake into pieces through the creation of art could be seen to be identical with emptying culture."

Based on this stance, Heri Dono is inclined to work with other people to create his work. He wants to assure himself that he is producing a work that deals with culture, rather than a work that merely tells his personal artistic sentiments. He has a lot of experience working with groups of people and communities. For example, he has often worked with mechanics to develop parts of his installations which were made from components of used transistor radios. Dono explains:

"You can find thousands of small radio shops in Yogyakarta repairing used transistor radios. After being repaired, these radios are sold cheaply to the grassroots. I see the used radio business as a culture in itself. The mechanics have recycled goods that were thrown away. They made a device out of invaluable items that could spread out information among the grassroots. Do not forget that these radios also provide entertainment."

To Heri Dono, innovation in an artistic sense is a cultural matter. This innovation, he believes, happens in everyday life and is not related to what has been believed as "pure art" or "fine art." The tendency to recycle junk and thrown-away things in the grassroots is an innovation that he feels is based on artistic compassion.

Years ago, I wrote about Heri Dono's interest in making works out of items like Coca-Cola cans that had been thrown away. In the recent interview he told me that it is not significant to consider this action as his way of showing art. It is more important to see it as the effort of poor people developing traditions to survive through difficult situations, where, according to Dono, "Creations show the fact that tradition continuously makes breakthroughs not for the sake of artistic means but more for practical

means.”

Heri Dono explained that when he brought this concept to the world art forum he intended to show how artistic innovation should actually be considered. According to him, these kinds of innovations are overlooked by art analysis and art criticism because the works that show the innovations are usually categorized as applied art or at best—craft products.

Heri Dono's statement clearly shows a critical view towards cultural hegemony. In opposing cultural hegemony, views in cultural studies celebrate the elimination of barriers between High Art and popular art in everyday life. The elimination of this barrier was meant to contravene the belief that only High Art deals with artistic values, meanwhile popular art shows the low taste of the “common” people.

Heri Dono's stance is understandable, as he feels that his work is an evidence of cultural hegemony that exists in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the debate on cultural hegemony is not the only matter raised by Sahal and other critics in their criticism. They are more critical on the absence of an aesthetical dimension that they think was extricated in works influenced by cultural studies.

In criticizing the contextual approach in art criticism, they tend to separate text from context. To them, “context” is perceived as social and cultural backgrounds, whereas the text is perceived as a textual phenomenon.

In his article, Sahal wrote that contextual approach in art criticism tends to explore matters that are outside the work of art. This criticism overlooks the text, which he sees as a medium that has an autonomous artistic value. Thus contextual approach tends to deny aesthetical experience in reading the work of art. It is Sahal's opinion that the aesthetical experience is the “soul” of art and art criticism.

In my opinion Sahal and other critics were not aware that there is an antilogy in cultural studies when it enters art discourse. Views in cultural studies denies High Art and do not believe that there is particular value to literature, fine art, theatre and sedate music. As Heri Dono said, values should be searched for in cultural acts. Nevertheless, views under the label of cultural studies in fact do not (or cannot) deny High Art as a tradition because it is impossible to deny the practice of art.

Thus, on the one side, cultural studies denies High Art but, on the other, it celebrates art infrastructures that have developed within the tradition of High Art. To me this inconsistency very often results in an unclear positioning of views in theories under the label, “cultural studies.” In describing artistic phenomenon, it is not easy to know when the theorists are talking about art and when they are talking about cultural matters.

In my opinion due to the unclear positioning of views under the label “cultural studies,” Sahal and other critics were trapped when they began to attack the contextual approach in art criticism. Instead of analyzing the grounding of cultural studies they attacked views in cultural studies in the course of relating them to aesthetics. This is why their criticism goes back to the debate of theories in aesthetics. In fact, the refusal to acknowledge the hierarchy of art, as well as the belief in cultural plurality, under the label of cultural studies can be understood as rejection of previous common beliefs based on the principles of aesthetics.

The rejection of art hierarchy could be seen as part of the continuous debate on Plato's premises of metaphysical beauty and sensual beauty in aesthetics. Seeing it as a linear development of views in aesthetics, this rejection is a very late reaction towards 19th century aesthetics. Meanwhile, celebrating plurality in culture (and art) could be seen as a resistance towards universalism, the fundamental premise of modernism and also a resistance towards absolutism of the text which is the keynote of modernist criticism.

I see the criticism towards political euphoria in Indonesia as a revitalization of the outdated debate on art and society. It is clear that textual phenomenon, as mentioned

by Sahal, had already been “constructed” by the painter Henri de Saint-Simon and a group of industrialist in 1825 through the *Avant-garde Manifesto*. This was then opposed by the *Realist Manifesto* which was declared by socialists Courbet and Boudelaire in 1861. From the development of these two manifestos, the endless debate on art for art’s sake found its starting point.

Heri Dono reacted to Sahal’s criticism in another way. He is of the opinion that text and context in art criticism, as well as in creating works, cannot be separated. He denied that he has been ignoring the aesthetic experience in creating his work, as he explained: “All of my work is based on aesthetical experiences; in other words, I decide to develop an idea into a work of art after my “aesthetic feeling” assures me that the idea is worth being expressed. Not all phenomenon that surrounds us has a significant enough meaning to be expressed.”

Explaining his aesthetic principles, he told me that at the very beginning of his career in the 1970s he asked himself, what art is and how aesthetical feelings relate to art expression:

“I came to the conclusion that aesthetical feelings relate to collectivity and this is why I reacted to the common belief that works of art should reflect individual aesthetic experiences and the content of the work is then a personal matter. I felt something is not right when I saw my works reflecting my sorrowful feelings. I felt it was not the type of feelings that should be expressed in a work of art.”

The outcome of that insight was then transferred to his interest in cartoons as an artistic medium. Heri Dono found the world of cartoons interesting because in this world everything is lively: “In my mind the cartoon world is similar to an animistic world where everything has soul, spirit and feelings. In this kind of world, communication has no barrier. I know the world of cartoons does not make sense but in fact we enjoy and even adore cartoon films.”

Through this kind of observation he came to be of the opinion that art should be like cartoon films, which can offer the artist a chance to explore the “illogical mind.” When expressed in works of art it could trigger motives among people to resist the domination of logic. After exploring the world of cartoons, Heri Dono was attracted to *wayang* performances (traditional Indonesian puppetry). To him *wayang* performances and cartoon films are similar to each other: “*Wayang* in some ways is simple animation and we actually can use the structure of *wayang kulit* for making cartoon films.”

Heri Dono told me that as a result of his encounter with *wayang* performances he attained a new understanding of aesthetic experiences. “In general I changed my interest from art to arts,” he explained. “I felt the need to explore musical and theatrical sensibilities of art beyond my present visual perception of art.” At the time of this enlightenment he felt that the aesthetics of *wayang* performances had a strong spiritual dimension related to the identification of matters in everyday life: “Through this awareness I came to believe that the cultural relativity of works of art is significant. Art as a medium which could be based on any artistic convention is merely a vehicle.”

In his opinion medium does not mean art materials. It could be anything—an object, something ready made, a sign or a symbol or even an idea. He explained that the medium is not related to originality or individuality and thus it is not a personal domain of artists:

“The medium is a kind of language where it is hard to know who actually has invented it. In art we can build a medium from things that surround us. Artists just pick them up, in a sense, borrowing them from culture and then this gives them meaning or another meaning, if the borrowed sign or symbol already has meanings.”

I further asked him if these aesthetical principles of his was understood when he presented his works in regional exhibitions or other events abroad. In answering my question, he said, "In comparison with critics in Indonesia, curators and critics abroad are more open." I went further by asking him whether the openness resulted in an understanding of the aesthetical dimension in his work. Heri Dono responded by saying, "I think curators abroad latched onto my work because they knew that I explore hidden artistic views of the people which are overlooked by critics. It is a matter of High/Low Art, when we usually talk about this matter."

I backed Heri Dono into a corner when I asked him a longer question, "Did the High/Low Art discussion consider the aesthetic dimension of your work? If the case was not totally a social or cultural case, but contended as a case of spiritual contemplation, was the High/Low Art discourse proper in reading the case?" He responded with a very short answer, "Probably not."

I am aware that I conditioned the question so Heri Dono would give an answer that I expected—I was acting like a policeman who treated him as a defendant. Thus the answer given to my long question is probably not Dono's real answer. Nevertheless, I indeed have a strong feeling that the aesthetical dimension in work done by a Third World artist like Dono is overlooked in the world art forum, simply because the aesthetical dimension is unreadable.

The unreadable aesthetical dimension is the case raised by criticism towards political euphoria which has recently emerged in Indonesia. The objection of this criticism is the imbalance of the reading of the text and context in criticism that show the influence of cultural studies. Nevertheless the criticism failed to point out the exact problem.

To me the criticism will clear its goal if the determined work of art in the analysis is meant to be that of a Third World artist and not just any work of art. In this sense, it is phenomenal why observations in the world art forum tend to explore the social-cultural background and deny the aesthetical dimension. I find this tendency to be due to the imbalance of knowledge on works of the Third World. There is adequate information on the social and cultural background of Third World works of art, while there isn't nearly any information on the aesthetical dimension of its art. Efforts in the past that have tried to analyze this have always been trapped in discussing Western aesthetics.

The common error that makes the analysis always go back to Western aesthetics is also seen in Ahmad Sahal's criticism, which is the separation of text and context that cannot be actually separated. In my opinion, there should be a rereading of what contextual art is, where we intentionally see the fact that text and context can not be disassociated.

The separation of text and context will attribute to an incorrect conclusion that sees a work of art as contextual due to its social and cultural background. At the same time, it sees the aesthetical dimension as a universal matter. This conclusion does not add anything new to our knowledge since social and cultural matters have been contextual all the time. Thus it is significant to believe that the aesthetical dimension is contextual.

The term "contextual art" is indeed meant to identify the differences in art. This term that has its roots in the belief that art is a plural phenomenon stands only as long as identifying differences is still in the process (the term is different than those that point out identities, as in the term "Asian art").

The very basic problem of contextual art that covers both text and context is the uncertainty of identifying local discourses. Local discourse is directly related to the knowledge of art that has been dominated. Identifying the local discourse is liberating this knowledge and making it readable. It should be clearly understood.

Art discourses that resist the "international" hegemony in art has put the freeing from that dominated knowledge on their agenda. Nevertheless, this agenda in fact never

really comes to be realized, although it is apparent that local discourse is indispensable to discourse of world art that sees art as a plural phenomenon. In this sense, discourse of world art results from mediation of the world's local discourse.

I have to admit that it is not the regional or the global art forum who are responsible for identifying the local discourse. It is the Third World itself who is responsible for elaborating on the local discourse. Nevertheless, the dominated artworld in the Third World is in fact too weak for the task. This weakness has become worthwhile because the world art forum in the First World, where the process of new art discourses took place, has inaccurately perceived the local discourse.

The local discourse (in a plural sense) has been perceived as localness. When imposed in a binary global-local point of view, the localness constructs a half of an overly simplified slogan, "Glo-cal." The slogan makes an assumption of a mixture of terms that does not describe a certain reality.

In that case the emerging criticism in Indonesia that questioned the connection between art and culture has its validity. Without asserting art as the frame of the discourse, "Glo-cal" could be anything, since showing it through cultural matters is nothing new. The cultural spectrum is too wide to conduct a specific discourse.

In the art discourse, "Glo-cal" immediately shows its inaccuracy. If the localness is meant to be a local art discourse, any world or regional exhibitions could show that the localness is already inclusive of globalness. There is no need to add an explanation that localness in any expression of art has to consider globalness.

Hypothetically, I see globalness in local discourse to be rooted in the High Art tradition. I am resigned to the fact that this particular statement will not be acknowledged in any contemporary art forum. Contemporary art, which has been considered as a kind of common denominator in the process of art discourse, has exploited localness only to differentiate postmodernist art and modernist art. In fact, whereas modernist art tends to deny localness, contemporary art, which is adversely different from modernist art, explores localness. In such a case, it is impractical to connect localness with the High Art tradition.

When the "global-local" point of view was translated to a "global-regional" point of view in a regional forum, localness became regional solidarity. It is interesting to see that the outcome of this translation was not to come up with another slogan but to find "regional art," as in Asian art, Southeast Asian art or even Asia-Pacific art.

This idea indeed could be seen as showing an outdated tendency; that is, searching for identity. Nevertheless, as a phenomenon, the issue of "regional art" shows a predisposition towards searching for an art discourse instead of a "cultural discourse." In my opinion, this is a passage to find a local discourse; the local discourse being an art discourse. Yet such discourse does not have to be confined to artistic matters only, since it could open discussions on cultural matters.

To me, identification of a local discourse is a matter of observing art convention which is enclosed by its own context. The "contextual convention" contains communal understanding which have been taken for granted in local circles but never developed into a discourse due the dominance of Western art theories. To me this repressed communal understanding is the hidden paradigms, therefore, the identification of local discourse is to perceive the repressed understandings as its discursive elements.

In the case of Indonesian art, identifying local discourse is a matter of communal understandings that have emerged since the 19th century (when High Art tradition was adapted) up until now. I have seen several communal understandings that could be considered as hidden paradigms of Indonesian art discourse. For example, there is the fact that the majority of Indonesian artists believe the notion of artistic expression being related to spirituality. This spirituality that is commonly perceived as mysticism (following the Western perception) never developed into a significant art discussion, let alone an art discourse.

Heri Dono is one among many Indonesian artists who believes that the aesthetical dimension in his work is based on spirituality, as he states: "I tend to counter rational conclusions in my mind that observe things through materiality. In this process I rely on spirituality and aesthetical experiences that very often provide me with surprising ideas which show some kind of paradox."

Such is the perception of Indonesian artists when they observe representation and cultural matters. I recently interviewed Srihadi Soedarsono, a painter with more than 50 years of experience,<sup>2</sup> where he gave me similar views to Heri Dono's, that is, where spirituality goes beyond materiality. He states: "Single substance that we commonly perceive through materiality do not represent whole reality. Representation through spirituality in my paintings tends to find substances of reality."

The effort to find local discourse by looking at communal understandings in the development of art in the Third World is far from being discussed. This may be because a common perception holds that local discourse is "charting" a totally new discourse. Such effort has been "constructing" mediations of discursive elements which are found in the culture. The goal is to eradicate previous beliefs in art that have been tainted by absolutism.

To me the idea of eliminating absolutism by denying previous art development is a solemn one. Since the death of absolutism and universalism is celebrated, assuming that the scrutiny of absolutism influence ends in a search for the universal truth is baseless. The scrutiny in identifying local discourse is a matter of finding a contextual truth.

#### Notes

1. Ahmad Sahal, "Cultural Studies dan Tersingkirnya Estetika," *Kompas* (2 June 2000).
2. Srihadi Soedarsono is one of the pioneers of Indonesian modern art.



## Dono's Paradox: the Arrow and the *Kris*

David Elliott

Around 470 CE, long before any of us was born, the Greek philosopher and mathematician Zeno proposed a number of paradoxes which challenged what he could see to be the truth. He and a group of associates<sup>1</sup> rejected previous wisdom in favor of a logical approach focused on the infinite divisibility of time and space. Zeno tried to analyze motion and deduced that it was impossible. One of the most famous of his paradoxes has the ontological and spiritual reverberation of a Zen *ko-an*. Briefly, it states that when an archer shoots an arrow from a bow, it will never reach its destination because at each moment it occupies a space which is equal in length and volume only to itself. Therefore logically it is at rest.

Zeno may have been more fascinated by the fallacies in his arguments than in the arguments themselves. As a result he has been credited as the father of modern dialectics. The straightforward trajectory of the arrow—often a metaphor for swiftness and directness—might therefore not be quite as straightforward as it seems. And then there is another distinctly regional weapon: the wavy-bladed *kris*. The dagger which Heri Dono explained to me was typical of the Indonesian mentality: “People find it difficult to confront and express the truth and the reality of their lives. Fear is the disease which prevents them from saying what they want to say. The word of truth cannot always run in a straight course but like the *kris* has a wavering edge. Some people have to use a coded, slang language or write graffiti as the only means by which authority and government can be criticized.”<sup>2</sup>

This led me to think about how his work has evolved over the past 15 years within an Indonesian/Southeast Asian context as well as more broadly on the international scene. I have also reflected on how he has negotiated the many demands and pressures which are bound to bear on any developing artist but which have been particularly acute in the pressure cooker of the militarized and virtually totalitarian Indonesia from which he derived so much creative energy, wisdom and imagery.

During the past two years the situation in Indonesia has changed dramatically. The oppressive, militaristic government of Suharto has been swept away and it is not yet clear what the future will be. This liberation has even spawned new slang words which have filtered into critical writing such as *ngeledak*, meaning *to tease, taunt or ironize*, which one critic has recently used to describe the work of the artists who have emerged during the latter half of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that that this can also be applied retrospectively to the work of Heri Dono. And because this is a word which could not have been used to describe his work previously, maybe this is just another aspect of things being not quite as straightforward as they seem?

I first saw Heri Dono's work in 1993 at the opening of the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane and was strongly impressed by its breadth, ambition and rootedness in Indonesian culture. The paintings alone perhaps would not have caught my eye but the sound installation, the *Gamelan of Rumor* (1992-93, cat.no.7), the shadow puppets displayed on a rack and the *wayang kulit* performance, in which the puppets were used, tipped the balance. They were all celebratory, humorous but with a bitter undertow of social and political criticism; this is what stuck in my mind. Two years later the Museum of Modern Art, of which I was then director, invited Heri Dono to come to Oxford on a residency.

I have since wondered quite what it was I took away with me in my impressions of the exhibition in Brisbane. I believe that I understood a lot about Heri Dono's work and its context but there was also a lacuna. Perhaps this was inevitable—something I could not have apprehended, something about which Julie Ewington wrote in “Between the Cracks,” her review of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial; she was referring to the filters which we, westerners, easterners, southerners, northerners—outsiders—cannot avoid applying to all the information, knowledge and perceptions we receive.<sup>4</sup> No this was not Kipling's interdict about non-comprehension between Eastern and Western “races,”<sup>5</sup> nor did it even derive from the condition of being a citizen of one of the ex-imperial

countries—postcolonial discourse is relevant to the situation in Indonesia but is not dominant. The view that can be glimpsed by the outsider, fleetingly between the cracks, is more like the difference between the straight flight of the arrow, which moves but cannot be logically proved to do so, and the wavering blade of the decorative, metaphorical *kris*. That they are a means of attack as well as of self defence is what they have in common—they also both leave a deadly wound.

We all talk blithely about the same abstract theoretical concepts: colonialism and postcolonialism, modernity and postmodernity, totalitarianism and democracy, late capitalism and globalization, traditionalism and modernization. But as soon as we step outside the Seminar Room, we are no longer sure what such terms mean for there is no consensus about their significance. We are unable to enforce a single understanding. Perhaps critical theory could be regarded as the new Imperialism through which the verbal, publishing, academic “West” attempts to suborn the rest of the world? Maybe we have all become its unwitting agents? But critical theory need not be a single hegemonic discourse and many of these abstract concepts, if they have any relevance at all, can be redefined or massaged locally to do the job that is needed. And this seems to have already been happening.

Is modernity with its historical dimension in Southeast Asia the same as that in Africa or Western or Eastern Europe?<sup>6</sup> Of course not. Is postmodernity worth bothering about in Malaysia or Indonesia? Probably not unless it is useful in some way or can be trotted out, like the very best china, to impress the relatives. Not surprisingly in the chaotic context of post-totalitarian Indonesia, critic Rizki A. Zaelani analyses a recent “loss of...faith in a number of meta-narratives of modernity” as well as a weakening of the desire or hope of ever becoming “modern.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time he has tracked an intensification of what has been described as an “art of revolt” which is seen as a means of redefining and grasping hold of the meaning of truth and historical development.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of this discussion there are two things that have always particularly attracted me to Heri Dono's work: its critical and dynamic relation to cultural tradition and its intense reflection about and critique of lived experience and reality. As an artist Dono has positioned himself at the margins of society, identifying both with the past and the poor, which in a rapaciously modernizing totalitarian state such as Indonesia tended to be regarded as the same thing. He has also consistently shown a sympathy for those who have been disempowered but typically, and of necessity, has not regarded this as a political involvement. Dono's work is a million miles from *agitprop*, it is too laconic for that; and perhaps this is what he was asserting when he wrote “I am not involved in political or social problems...but my paintings, maybe they are identical with politics or society. The main thing is that the social structure must be turned round 180 degrees.”<sup>9</sup>

This statement is almost dangerously ambiguous: his work is a reflection of reality but also one which implies that the reality (the social structure) must be turned round to match the art. Dono's reflection is, in fact, a critique—and one which waveringly balances on a knife's edge. Until very recently any direct political statement could be life threatening. In May last year, fellow artist Dadang Christanto recollected that “while Soeharto was in power, in general, political perspectives did not emerge in most artists' art works. They also avoided discussing politics in daily life. Talking politics was taboo—how much more so to put political concepts into works of art. This matter is easily understood if we remember the terror created by the New Order, that is, how fear was created among the people.”<sup>10</sup> Christanto walked a similar tightrope in his own work.

No doubt as a result of this repressive climate as well as from general conviction, Dono has stressed his orientation towards the “problems of humanity in general.” One of the ways in which he does this is by using humor as a trigger or threshold: “Imagine a person who doesn't look deeper into my paintings will laugh, see my work as an expression of hilariousness. But someone who enters into it might cry... I am not only

involved with problems of visual art. I am involved with tragedy.”<sup>11</sup> And the tragedy is not only that of Indonesia: “The world is crazy and frightening. Look at the hunger in Africa for example: they need food but they’ve got bullets.”<sup>12</sup> Under pressure to work abroad for considerable stretches, Dono has transposed his Indonesian sensibility and experience, as well as his work, into other climates. The painting *The Magician Who Cannot be Killed* (1990), refers to an argument he had with a Czech market trader in Switzerland within the context of the fantasy of the shadow puppet play, *Conductor Killed in Holland* (1992), refers to another real event.

At this point we can begin to perceive Dono’s Paradox more clearly. Like Zeno’s arrow his work can only logically occupy the space which it itself takes up and therefore it cannot move forward—yet we all can see (except, thank God, for some particularly bone headed bureaucrats) that it does. We also may understand that silence can be eloquent and that the artist, like the *kris*, may occasionally have to move in one direction to strike in another.

Although he was born in Jakarta, he has been based for many years in Yogyakarta, the old capital, which has a much slower pace. From 1980 to 1987 he studied painting at the Academy there and obviously acquainted himself with the work of Miró and late Picasso combining their cut out figures on flatish grounds with elements of traditional Javanese art which also used the cut out form within non-naturalistic space.<sup>13</sup> A key painting of this time was *Eating Shit* (1983, cat.no.10), an acrylic and collage on canvas one metre square. Respect for one’s elders is the rule in most Southeast Asian societies and not only does this express an untypical youthful rebellion against authority—perhaps even against his teachers at art school—but it also has a political dimension: the artist had heard reports that dissidents were forced to eat their own excrement while in detention; this was his recording of a fact which was not generally talked about. At this time Dono also felt the need to develop a more participatory and broadly based form of art and in 1987 studied the *wayang kulit* or traditional Javanese shadow puppet play with Sukasman, one of its masters. Dono now began to make his own puppets which often were related to characters who also appeared in his paintings. These enabled the artist to use parable or pseudo-myth in a more dynamic way than was previously possible. There had always been elements of comedy within the Hindu epics of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which provided the staple for the traditional *wayang* and, as it was a popular art form, the burlesque was often accentuated. But although Java and the whole Indonesian state is predominantly Muslim, and has increasingly become subject to the pressures of fundamentalism, these stories are rooted in a pre-Muslim past and are often combined with animist folk tales and other popular beliefs which have a distant relationship with Buddhism. Dono exploited the multicultural and multifaceted possibilities of the *wayang*, with its proliferation of mythological monsters, as something which could be easily updated. He often enlisted for his performances people from the poorest areas of the city.

One of these was *Kuda Binal (Wild Horse)* (1992), a performance based on a traditional horse trance dance which was ostensibly a statement against the “fossilization of traditional art...[and]...the systematic destruction of nature by human greed and arrogance.” But the synopsis spells out a far more searching critique, if one cares to see it, carefully crafted within the traditional story lines of dancing dummy horses, warring armies, tempting the Gods and the ultimate destruction of all. Dono’s armies are not the massed Hindu legions but the steel helmeted and gas masked monsters of the present.<sup>14</sup> Tellingly he links the performance with the official event ASEAN Year ’92: “*Kuda Binal* isn’t presented to gather support for any cause, or to welcome visitors to visit ASEAN Year ’92. But, of course, [a] visit [to] ASEAN Year ’92 supports the concept of *Kuda Binal*.”<sup>15</sup>

Three large-scale installations *Watching the Marginal People* (1992), and *Gamelan of Rumor* (1992-93, cat.no.7) and *Fermentation of Mind* (1994, cat.no.5) further nail down the threatening and exploitative atmosphere of this time as well as Dono’s perception of

how the state inflicted its terror. All of a sudden we become not only the audience but also the actors in a much larger puppet play, one in which the state and its cronies are the puppeteers and “authority, marginalization and rumor exist because a big system already built it and we as human-beings are included as puppets or as the audience for it.” The all-seeing eyes revolve, the teeth are bared, the quiet whispering of machines continues through which all information and disinformation are disseminated, rows of heads nod rhythmically behind school desks—all these things are pervasive elements in works which seem like strange hybrids of children’s toys, *bricolage*, props for a horror film and high technology. This, in itself, is a comment on the governance of the country as well as on how it enforces its power and exploits its resources.

In Oxford in the winter of 1995-96, Heri Dono organized a performance and an exhibition at the end of a three-month residency there. The performance *The Drunkenness of Semar* (1995), involved local people from one of the community groups and took place in a disused church. In this he examined, in a playful but powerful way, the impact of modernization and militarism on a developing society. *Semar* is a priest, guru and joker who lives in low class society but who is also a Hindu God with both male and female characteristics. This multifaceted character is the starting point for a number of intricate word plays and parodies from which the piece derives its force. Through the invention of a new character, *Supersemar* (a parody of Superman), the figure is keyed back to the Decree of 11 March 1966, the date of the military coup by which President Suharto replaced President Sukarno—the founder of the Indonesian Republic.<sup>16</sup> And there is also a traditional Javanese cake called *Semar Mendem*, which means *The Drunkenness of Semar*, and this for Dono became a metaphor for politicians’ sweet talk: “The leaders of Government when speaking on TV may appease the masses with their wisdom and sweet charm but their abuse of power belies this sweetness. I used to eat the cake but now I perform it.”<sup>17</sup> Dono’s version of this story departs from the Hindu original in that he shows the God when he is drunk and can no longer impart wisdom to his people. “In this condition Semar can be appropriated by the authorities and turned into a devil, they can pretend to have Semar’s sober wisdom. Thus a dictator can seem to be a man of the people.”<sup>18</sup> Yet still, if you did not know any of this, the performance could seem like a violent and rather eccentric fairy tale. But the Devil which Semar became is still finally destroyed.

In the Museum of Modern Art, Dono constructed *Blooming in Arms* (1996), a vast installation comprised of monstrous helmeted military figures (about 15 feet high) made out of chicken wire. They were lit dramatically in the dark with glowing red eyes and artificial limbs, the walls of the gallery had been painted khaki, camouflage netting draped the roof and the museum guard wore military battle dress. A word play may also be found in the title of this work which contrasted the Indonesian government’s official green policy (*penghijauan*) of encouraging every family to plant a tree outside their home with its economic policy of allowing multi-national interests to decimate the forests of Sumatra, Kalimantan and Irian Jaya. Under such circumstances little that is really green could be said to bloom—except, of course, for the khaki uniforms of the young army cadets which grow in ever increasing numbers. In fact the situation was even worse as “children lost their limbs. They are innocent but they have to live with artificial legs for all their lives. Some have lost their families and their souls.”<sup>19</sup> Here Dono again moves from the specifically Indonesian context to one which is widespread throughout the region and the world; in the process the land mine becomes a metaphor for hidden threat and can again be tied back to Indonesia, its point of origin.

It is fair to say that contemporary Indonesian art was very little known in Great Britain in 1996 and remains so to this day, nevertheless there was considerable public interest in Heri Dono’s work and a number of reviews appeared in the press. One in particular, *Speaking Out by Lying Low* by Sacha Craddock in *The Times*, had a considerable impact.<sup>20</sup> This drew the attention of the Indonesian Embassy in London to the