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Mella Jaarsma

Nindityo Adipurnomo

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Tamarind From The Mountain, Salt From The Sea, Meet in the Cooking Pot¹

M. Dwi Marianto

This is a collection of snapshots and comments about Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo's contemporary art, exhibited in the Erasmus Huis, Jakarta, March 1998. Mella exhibits her reflections on things in the world around her, through images of frogs, breath, and a baby's body. She lets various associations emerge from the visual elements she combines. Nindityo exhibits his contemplation on specific aspects of Javanese culture, which he feels creates various forms of introversion and absurdities, through the language of hairpieces, motorcyclist's helmets, and his own hairs. Nindityo's current work is an other expression of his laughter and criticisms on the oddities and absurdities he encounters in the culture of everyday life.

These two artists fit the Malay proverb: *tamarind from the mountain and salt from the sea, meet in the cooking pot*. Mella Jaarsma, born in 1960 in Emmerloord, Holland, was educated in art at the Minerva Akademie, Groningen (1978-1984). She also studied in 1984 for one semester in the Jakarta Institute of Arts, and in 1985-86, she studied in the Yogyakarta Art Institute. Nindityo Adipurnomo was born in 1961, in Semarang, in a *priyayi*² family of mixed Yogyakarta-Surakarta descent, who lived in Semarang. He had the opportunity to study for one year (1986-1987) in the Rijks Akademie in Amsterdam, where the atmosphere of learning and teaching was liberal and individualistic. He experienced culture-shock, but he enjoyed the atmosphere of art education and the facilities there ecstatically. Mella (milk) and Nindityo (coffee) through their art, cultural bargaining and family life, form a dialectical relationship and become coffee with milk.

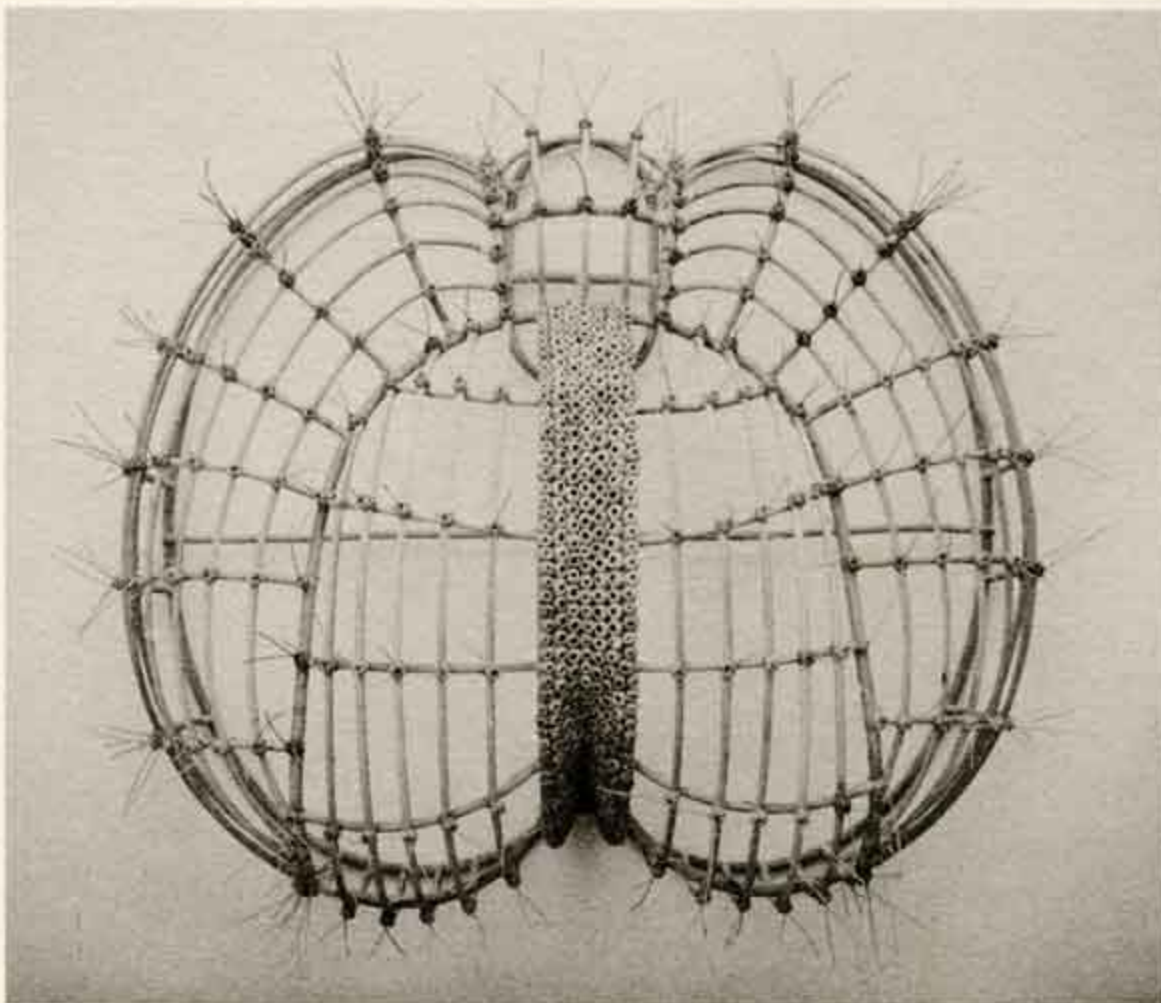
NINDITYO AND THE JAVANESE CULTURE

In one of his important past phases, Nindityo focused his attention on floor plans of Javanese dance. He borrowed the analysis of the Dutch anthropologist Clara van Brakel, who observed the classic *Bedoyo* dance using a birds-eye view. In Java, and also in Indonesia, this way of observing dance is uncommon. As a follow-up, Nindityo created a work that united dance performance with visual-art elements, in the work titled *Spiritual Space* performed in the Japan Foundation, Jakarta, 1992.

In his further development Nindityo has allowed himself to play, between the comic and the serious, using symbolic objects and daily life patterns of Javanese and Indonesian culture. He believes that each culture has daily life patterns that have become ritual, something which actually is special but doesn't seem so anymore because it has become common daily practise.

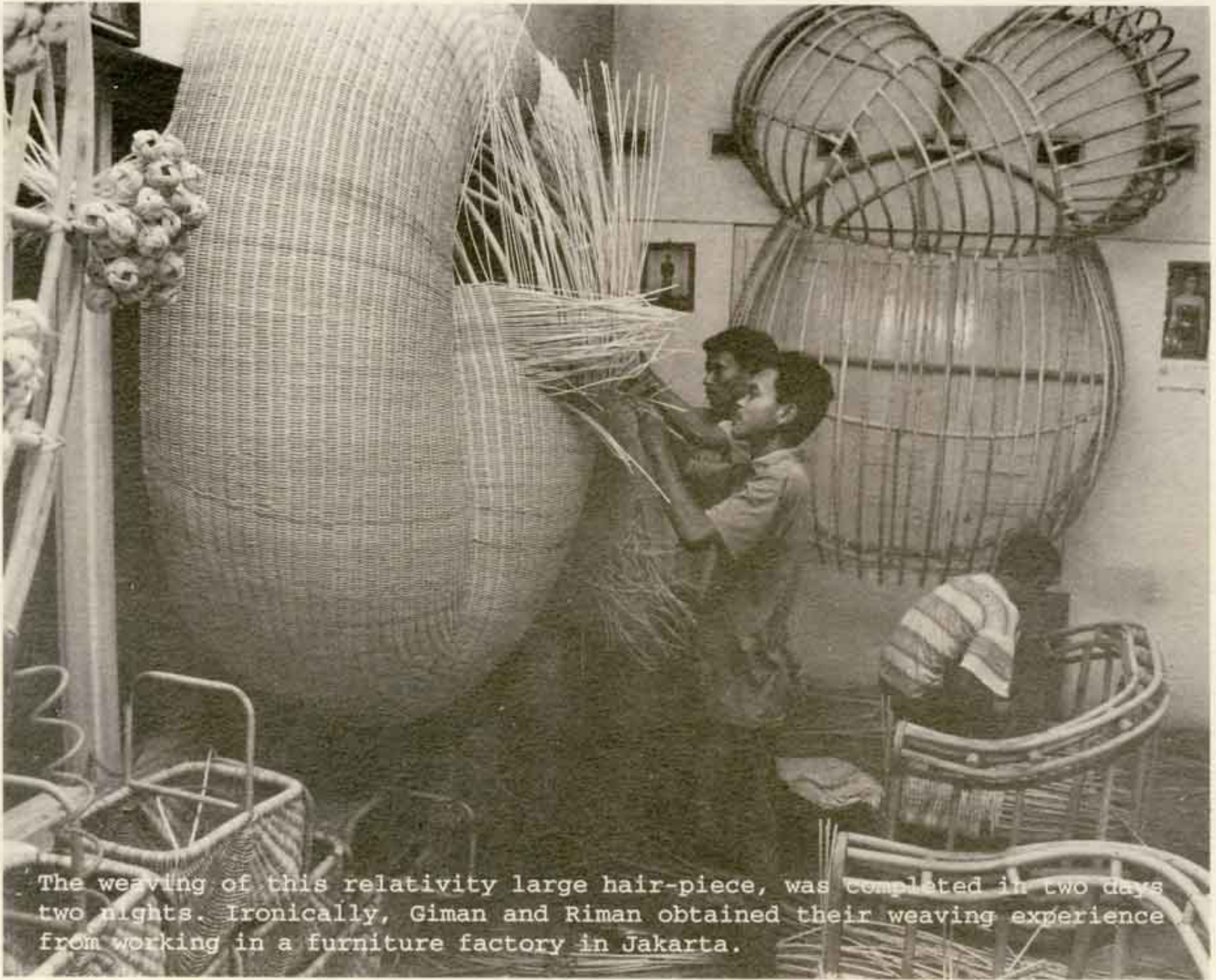
As an illustration, one might note that in the past, in Java, when hairpieces were widely used by the Javanese woman, there were people whose occupation it was to travel through villages to buy fallen hair from anybody. These hairs were then cleansed, combed, and made into a hairpiece. Judges in English courts, wear wigs of horse manes, and the guards of Buckingham Palace wear hats made of bear hair. Nindityo has explored the patterns in Javanese culture in relation to hair, as well as the symbolic meaning of certain hairstyles³. To emphasise an artistic statement, in one of his works he uses his own fallen hairs which he wraps in newspaper cuttings, notes the date, and puts them in plastic bags, as relics.

Nindityo imagines Javanese culture as a gamelan instrument that he is playing, he listens to the sound. He scratches at and highlights the exotic world of Javanese culture, with its esoteric spaces. He wants to personally experience the funny, the mystical, and the odd⁴. He delved into Javanese symbolism, which according to him has given birth to introversions, absurdities, and surprises, which flavour daily Indonesian life. One of these absurdities expressed in his work is a marriage between a hairpiece and a motorcyclist's helmet⁵, titled *Helmet Your Art, Your Earth, Your Heart, 1997-98*. Nindityo Adipurnomo's works are a creative transformation of his different ways of giggling, laughing, his serious contemplation, and sometimes his bewilderment and his awe of everything complex in Javanese culture. For him, the Javanese language seems odd, for often it functions as a brake that disables open, honest, communication. Is not the function of language to explain feelings, thoughts, and comments that one may have on something? Traditional Javanese society is not accustomed to speak openly. It rather communicates through various metaphors and euphemisms, among which is the hairpiece.



Nindityo Adipurnomo — **Hiding Rituals and The Mass Production III, 1997/1998, Rattan, 300 x 250 x 70 cm, Collection of the Artist.**

An other work is made up of a *konde gelung tekuk* (a traditional style hairpiece) made of rattan, of gigantic proportions 2,5 x 3 x 1 meters as the main component, and a series of illustrative photos that are placed under the hairpiece. The work is titled *Hidden Rituals and the Mass Production 1997/98*, and it represents everything that Nindityo has encountered in his explorations of the Javanese culture, of which he is part, but which he also sometimes observes from outside. The photos underneath, illustrate the rattan crafts-people in Trangsan, Gatak, Sukoharjo, Surakarta, who crafted Nindityo's hairpiece commission. This gigantic hairpiece is pulled out of its traditional context by enlargement. There are parts of the hairpiece that are left not woven, so that the strips of rattan sticking out



The weaving of this relatively large hair-piece, was completed in two days two nights. Ironically, Gimán and Riman obtained their weaving experience from working in a furniture factory in Jakarta.

appear like hairs. At the ends of those strips of rattan, there are strings that hold small plastic bags containing his own fallen hair (from his head, under his arms, and his pubic hair) which he wraps in newspaper cuttings. He specifically chooses cuttings of news and photos of corrupt figures.

Nindityo's works are complicated, and parallel to the nature of high Javanese (*krama*) that is spoken in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, which is also complex. Javanese once had 9 levels of language, each with a completely different vocabulary, starting from *ngoko* (low Javanese) to *krama*. Nindityo's art is a transformed collection of eroticism, swear words, and of his admiration for the Javanese skill of playing with symbols that are derived from things considered high and lofty or vulgar. But as a whole, his art still feels like *krama*, in which one must state intentions in graceful, refined, language. Not bluntly, but employing metaphors and specific body gestures and positions, in which feelings such as happiness- sadness - and anger are not readily expressed, to the extent that the speaker feels unjustified to state his or her ego clearly. The real idea or intention that is to be conveyed becomes lost in the grace of the refined words of the language. Nindityo's works is an apt representative of the Javanese culture with all its strength and weaknesses, - a culture which in many ways is the heartbeat of Nindityo's own thought and feelings.

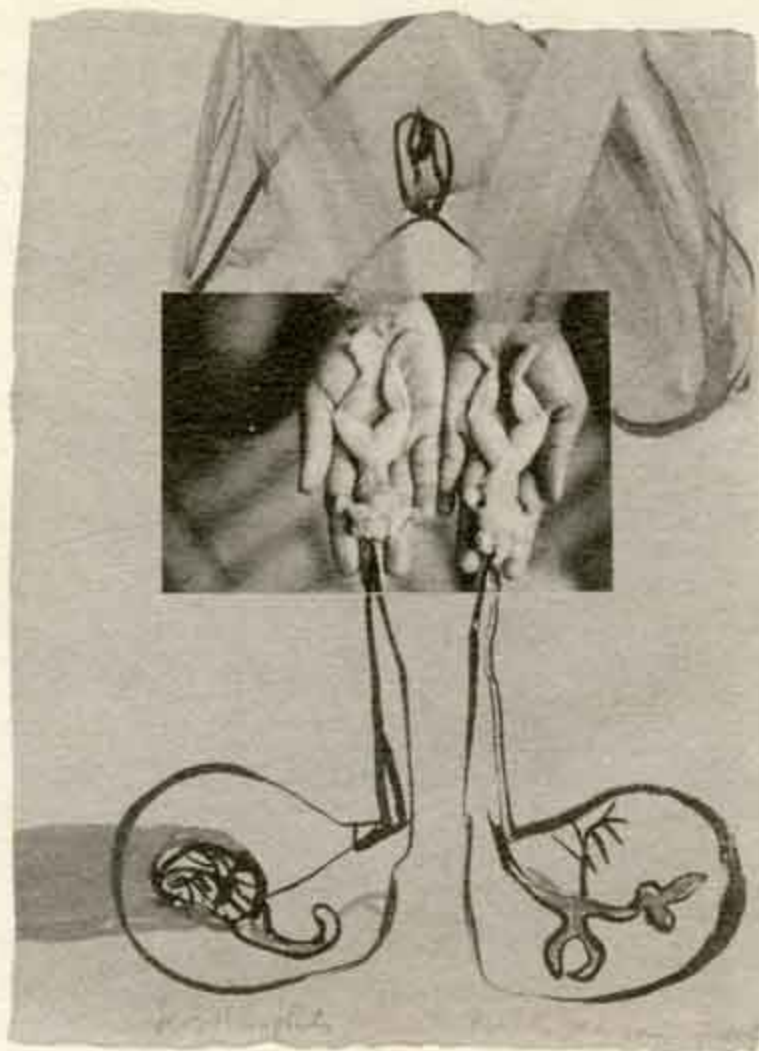
SEEING FROGS AS ANYTHING

5 The soul of Mella Jaarsma's art is the process of becoming. She used to create art that manifested her reflections on shadows, she followed shadows from Holland to Indonesia. In an other phase she focuses on life and death⁶. In the past two years Mella has been exploring the associations that she captures from observing the physical posture and the anatomy of the frog. Frogs suddenly caught her attention while she was shopping in the Patuk market in Yogyakarta. At that time her attention was captured by the skinned frogs being sold. The trade and consumption of frogs is common in Indonesia. But not for Mella, the frogs anatomy, which at a glance seems sexless, reminded her of a human body, her own.

The associations that emerged from seeing a frogs body, gave her an idea, and reminded her of the never ceasing real problems of everyday human life, such as the forms of violence or the ecological problems which have exceeded limits as in the pollution in the big cities which sooner or later will metamorphose the human body.

Unlike Nindityo, Mella deliberately frees herself from stereotyped symbolism. She explores the sub-conscious impulses and associations that emerge after observing the frogs. She follows the trail of her associations, from one image to an other until she stops at a limit of the concerned image. This process of diving and searching in the sub-conscious has already gone on for years, long before she took frogs as a subject to reflect on. It should be noted that ones sub-conscious is never free of the vibrations of the problems of those who are close and the society. The sub-conscious is always formed and coloured by the physical and the social-cultural environment. So it was no surprise to see Mella suddenly be driven to create a work with an ecological theme, like *Exchanging Breath With A Tree*.

Frogthoughts, 1996, is a two dimensional work on paper, executed using the technique of collage, drawing, and painting. There is a pair of hands supporting two frogs with large thighs. The reclining frogs bodies seem like human bodies, minus their reproduction organs and with big thighs. From the

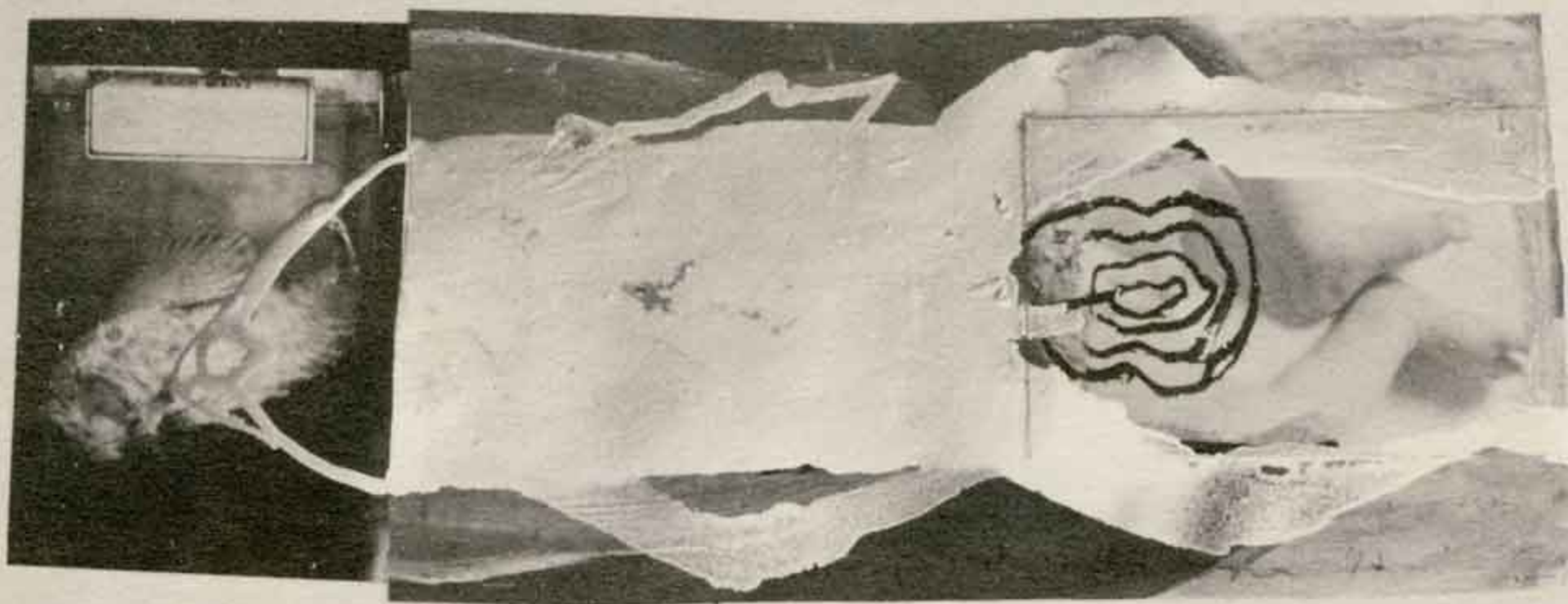


Mella Jaarsma — **Frogthoughts, 1996, photo, acrylic on paper, 25 x 35 cm**

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upper section of the frogs bodies, a drawing flows out, in the form of lines forming bubbles with abstract forms of organic tissue. She unites a photographic element with lines and large coloured brush-strokes which associate a pair of hands, two bent thighs and human genitals. Here she combines elements that under normal conditions have no connection whatsoever, but as a whole, the unity creates something different. There is the value of surprise, there is metaphorical breakthrough, and also a metamorphosis. This is one of Mella's working principles, to follow a trail of thought through the union of several different elements, to create something different and so on. See also the work titled *Frogthoughts II*, 1997.

In her art, Mella implements a belief that everything has its limit. Everything in growth, or in a happening, must have a limit, in its form and also in its way of developing. When this limit is transgressed, there is sure to be something else, like the great fires that raved the forests of Sumatra and Kalimantan, were caused by the crazy deforestation which from various aspects transgressed limits. *Black Cloud*, 1997, is Mella's response to that particular disaster. A blue - black cloud on the upper right corner is a symbolisation of the thick black smoke that forced itself on to human babies respiration organs. The baby really would like to shelter his nose from the smoke, but is not able to do so. The smoke is too strong, too abstract to stop. One can make an analogy, the image of a baby as the indigenous peoples and their culture, who have for centuries lived completely dependant on the forest life. They are helpless in competition with the newcomers who are armed with power (administrative, 'legal', and economic) to devour the forests. When the great fires were burning, people in Sumatra and Kalimantan really could not cover their noses from the thick haze that stayed for months. To add insult to injury, they were also blamed by the big forestry businesses as forest burners, the cause of the disaster. In the Indonesian



Mella Jaarsma — **Your portrait, 1998**, photo, acrylic, aluminium paint on paper, 40 x 17 cm

media, the real facts around the fires became an object of a no less grand scale euphemism.

Mella's technical speciality in art is her rejection of being tied down by symbolism. She follows any abstraction. She doesn't conceptualise her works tightly, she doesn't impose any forethought or design. She allows her imagination and fantasy to travel ahead, leaving behind her rationality and conceptual calculations, to follow the associations that emerge later with the abstract forms of her lines and strokes. Mella's art is abstract, executed expressively in spontaneity. But if her works are exhibited together, one can observe a formal character that always emerges from time to time. This is a sign that her capacity to give birth to associations is limited, and she is never immune to influences from her present world.

These two individual artists, who since 31 January 1988 have managed the Cemeti Art Gallery in Yogyakarta, are exhibiting works that are created using different conceptual and physical approaches. One makes a sound using the vibrations of Javanese language a la Nindityo, the other speaks in the resonance of Holland Spreken a la Mella.

Those that are different ought not be united through force in order to form an alliance or uniformity. This 'coffee with milk' exhibition is an underlining of an attitude that values difference, and understands that each individual has a unique history and rituals. This exhibition can be seen as a strengthening of a bridge that connects those differences, so that one may be creative and make the fruits of life bountiful.

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Dwi Marianto

Art observer

works at the Faculty of Visual Arts and The Research Institute

ISI Yogyakarta

1998

1 Translators Note: the title is an Old Malay proverb.

2 Translators Note: *priyayi* comes from the words *para yayi*, meaning younger relatives of the King, but means anyone remotely connected to the Java royal family.

3 In one of Java's traditional sub-cultures, a mother who has had children die, will shave all the hair except the back part, (*gombak* style) of a new-born baby or survivor. The hair left will be allowed to grow until a *ruwatan* ritual is held, when this hair will be cut.

4 Nindityo is not alien to Javanese mysticism and the intrigues between the various schools. His grandmother and grandfather followed the teachings of the *Hardo Pusoro* school, a school of Javanese mysticism with a social function of healing.

5 Many people use helmets merely to escape the law, which stimulates that every motorcyclist must wear a helmet. They wear 'lip-service' helmets, without any impact absorber or strap, - in other words helmets that are far from the standard safety requirements.

6 Such as the work she created in Munduk, Bali, year 1993. See the catalogue *Shadow, Life, Death*



Mella Jaarsma — **untitled, 1997, acrylic on paper, 55 x 40 cm**

