

Cemeti Art House:

A place for artists

with ideas

Contemporary artists Nindityo Adipurnomo and wife Mella Jaarsma never thought the Cemeti Art House, which they established in 1988 as a non-profit institution, would endure for more than a decade, or become one of the city's most respected art galleries.

The art house is alive and kicking, having been routinely housing selected exhibitions.

"What we did back in 1988 was a kind of an experiment for us, especially because there were not many opportunities at that time for artists to show their work. So we turned a guest room into an exhibition area and started to hold monthly exhibitions," Mella told *The Jakarta Post* recently.

She was referring to Cemeti's first exhibition room, called Cemeti Fine Art Exhibition Room, which was located on Jl. Ngadisuryan. It stood about one kilometer north of the current exhibition and office building at Jl. Panjaitan 41 Yogyakarta, which was designed by noted local architect and contemporary artist Eko Agus Prawoto.

An inaugural group exhibition was held for a month from Jan. 31 to Feb. 27, 1988, presenting the works of contemporary artists Heri Dono, Mella, Eddie Hara, Harry Wahyu and Nindityo.

"To our surprise, all the paintings we exhibited — some 20 in all — sold out," said Nindityo, or Nindit as he is fondly called, adding that the success of the exhibition encouraged him and his wife to continue with running Cemeti.

Fellow artists, including those participating in the inaugural group exhibition, also expressed support for

their ideas, thus giving them further confidence to go ahead with their plans for a professional art house.

The first step was changing the name of the art house, so as to make it marketable.

"Six months after the inaugural exhibition, we renamed it the Cemeti Modern Art Gallery. We thought it was more representative than the previous name," said Nindit, adding that they changed the name again in 1991 to Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery and finally to Cemeti Art House in 1999.

Sri Wahyuni

The Jakarta Post
Yogyakarta

"We decided to call it an art house rather than an art gallery, especially because of the different curatorial approach that we wanted to apply," Nindit said.

Previously, Cemeti just offered alternative space for young artists or students of fine art schools to exhibit their work.

In this regard, Cemeti used to invite creative artists who were strongly committed to art and pursued honesty in their work. This selection process was similar to other art houses and galleries that had sprung up across the city.

But later they realized that the rigid criteria made it impossible to reach out to the broader public. They were only known within a limited community comprising mostly artists, art observers, mass media and art collectors.

Clear proof of this was that it was always the same people who attended their exhibitions, just as at other

art galleries.

"The exhibition rooms may have been different, as were the exhibitions, but the visitors were the same old people," Nindit explained.

So Cemeti embarked upon a different strategy in selecting artists for its exhibitions.

It started looking for artists who took a different approach in their artwork, such as artists who involved people of various disciplines in their work, artists who were genuinely concerned about different segments of society.

Once, for example, Cemeti exhibited *Komunitas Bunyi* (Sound Community) by contemporary musician Haryo "Yose" Suyoto who brought dozens of craftsmen and manual workers into the exhibition room to help him produce a unique music: by kicking different kinds of work tools that they used in their daily work.

"Interaction between disciplines that focus on visual art is our priority," said Mella, adding that at least 11 different exhibitions had been exhibited every year at the art house since it was first established.

Another time it presented collaborative exhibitions involving artists of different interests and other related professionals.

By inviting artists who had the capability of creating interaction between disciplines and having them exhibit their work at Cemeti, they found that their exhibitions attracted people from all walks of life.

"I do think this is what has helped Cemeti survive," said Nindit, underlying the significance of keeping the art house open for 15 years.

He said that 2003 was also significant because both he

and Mella started to contemplate, reflect and rethink their efforts over the past 15 years.

"The concept (of how to select artists to exhibit at Cemeti) is the strength. We no longer focus on established artists but on artists who become involved in social issues or events.

"Their work, therefore, is a mixture of art and the real aspects of life, and not just artwork produced through regular artistic ability in a studio," Nindit said.

In this way, he said, Cemeti had been able to make use of participating artists to give life to the art house, which helps it offer and nurture fresh, new ideas that in turn attract a variety of visitors.

"It has also helped with the regeneration process," said Mella, adding that they do not mind dealing with beginners and accept failure as one of the risks of applying the concept.

Mella said that Cemeti also liked to follow the work of particular artists, explaining why some artists are exhibited several times.

At other times, Cemeti invites foreign artists to exhibit at Cemeti or sends artists abroad to exhibit.

"The reason why we do so is to open dialog with artists of different nationalities so that we won't be shallow-minded. We know that many of them have also brought innovations both in media as well in art creations," Nindit said, adding that among the countries that Cemeti artists had visited were the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, Australia, Singapore and Thailand.

Speaking about regeneration within the House's management and curatorship, Mella and Nindit have started to look for young curators to replace them.

Mella has plans to retire from Cemeti by the end of this year, wanting more time to concentrate on her own artistic talent.

"I think 15 years is enough

for me, and for the art house to have someone else. It's time for renewal," Mella said.

Nindit will not retire for a few more years, as he is supervising the search for prospec-

tive successors.

"I think it will take at least two more years to find and train someone exactly how we want him/her to be," Nindit said.