

From the Gallery

Provoking Painting

This is the second solo exhibition by Heri Dono at Nadi Gallery. His first one was held in September 2000, which also marked the opening of this gallery.

Just as his first solo exhibition two years ago, this one also presents Heri Dono's paintings only. However, a bit different with the previous one, this exhibition displays Heri Dono's works which were inspired by his own installation and performance art works. In such works like these, Heri Dono has been very productive; through these works as well he obtains recognition as a highly acclaimed contemporary artist in international forums.

The idea for this exhibition emerged last year when I made a visit to Heri Dono's place in Yogyakarta and invited him to present his works for the second time at Nadi Gallery. Enthusiastically, Heri Dono accepted this offer.

The thematic relations between his painting and his performance as well as installation works can be seen in some of his works through a video recording screened at the gallery. This video is Heri Dono's documentation of his special works, particularly performance art works.

Despite his international reputation as a contemporary artist at this present, Heri Dono always spares his time to exhibit in his own country. He always highlights his exhibition each year as his own birthday gift as well as to boost his own creativity.

I thank Heri Dono who has been willing to present his second exhibition at Nadi Gallery. In the same way, I also congratulate him for being awarded the "2nd Annual Enku Grand Awards" from Gifu Prefectural Government, Japan, which will be received by him in the beginning of next September. I also would like to thank Mr. Jaya Suprana for his willingness to open this exhibition.

Biantoro Santoso

Heri Provokes Heri

A Brief Introduction and Conversation with Heri Dono¹

Just as the visualizations of numerous pairs of eyes on the grotesque faces of fools and monsters in his paintings, it seems that there has always been more than one perception for Heri Dono to review and make experiments in the development of his contemporary art works.

In early 80's – when he was still studying at the Indonesian Art Institute, Yogyakarta – Heri Dono had made series of experiments to exit from his flat two-dimensional cartoon-paintings. He created “aquarium art”, assembling simple mechanical gadgets to move objects inside a glass box filled with water, imagining water inhabitants. Completely realizing the importance of playfulness, he then attached various objects on the propeller of a rotating fan hung on the ceiling of the exhibition room. Naughtily, he called it “*mubeng* art” (rotating art). Please note that at that time, contemporary art terms and installation art had not been widely known among artists.

Within those college years which were filled with experimental and playful spirit – as well as anxiety on the over-conservative art education system – he continued with another oddity of his art: hanging dozens of bells on the living room of his own house. For him, an artist needed not only to interact with idioms and concrete visual elements, but also to create something for the ears – at least the artist's own -, to learn how to recognize the essence of sound. Later on, it is known that he has been frequently invited to contemporary art forums bringing up a theme called ‘sound art’, where he even included fart in one of his works.

Since then, the development of Heri Dono's artworks has been showing a strong basis of liberation, experiments, mixtures, easiness and playful spirit as such. He is neither determined nor obsessed with one media; very obviously he chose to be a rather inscrutable pluralist instead of being a scorned specialist. He does not regard his recent explorations as being more radical than the previous ones; linear progress does not seem to be in his dictionary.

Therefore, we frequently hear and see Heri Dono provoking *wayang* “renders” in the traditional treasury that he admires while equalizing and imposing it upon with the presence of “screen” or “monitor” in the new art media named video. He understands Beuys and Borofsky – indeed -, yet he appears no less eager to recycle a story about a new *wayang* (traditional Javanese puppet theater) expert living in a village in Yogyakarta, Sukasman; as well as reciting the “madness” of an artist, Sutanto, who chose to live in the feet of a temple. Seemingly, he expects to hear more news of their next insanity, “hope of hearing from you soon”, to quote a title of one of his performance work.

It is clear that Heri Dono is a brilliant scavenger of local treasures and leftovers, carrying it away from their original place, context and source, blending it into a new realm of meanings: from cans of crackers to retailed electronic goods in markets, from a trishaw pedal to a set of *gamelan* instrument, from comics to his own urine, whether to create irony and critique for the society or just simply to laugh at himself.

The recreating of leftovers or residue to be new signifiers in his works contains a certain spirit, some sort of an intellectual form of *bricolage*: assembling found objects with a dash of improvisation and deep consciousness of the coincidental characteristics that can be discovered and experienced within it. A *bricoleur* deals with residual elements as a way of operation, a *modus operandi*. This form of *bricolage* brings up new kind of signifiers, but at the same time these signifiers do not only relate exclusively with their own presence: there is always a construction of meaning in any found objects.²

It might be possible that such construction is a reversed logic or a derangement: fools who expose their laughter are considered – always- not less foolish than the experts who seriously question and discuss everything. Yet, Heri Dono's madness or lunacy is also a paradox. While his installation and performance works – two main mediums desired by contemporary artists since end of 60s to leave stagnant modernism behind – always involve the skills, collaboration and cooperation with other people (“the marginal group”), Heri Dono still acknowledge the importance of individual expression as an artist, who works entirely in the autonomous space of personal freedom, just like writing a love letter, as he has established in the expressions of his paintings. For him, personal expression is a “character coming out of the system”, just as “the grand classical music that we recognize nowadays, was an experiment when it began.”

While saying that in his process of creation he does not intend to “become noble”, and “prefer to take risk in creating works which are not too deep and sublime, since it is a trap to finish yourself off”, he firmly adheres to the significance of personal expressions or individualities. On the other hand, when the individuality of the artist becomes very important to be notified, Heri Dono also never ceases to “honor a chicken seller to play a role in a performance”. Particularly in his installation and performance works, Heri Dono invites us to “see something by not (always) using personal paradigms”, but also “other people's”.

When modernism which cast out the importance of context has become a remaining left by artists, two significant aspects to mark Heri Dono's art at this present are creatively reinteracting with the community and the local traditions and giving valuable meaning to the presence of other individuals to rediscover the artist's individuality and the autonomous space in art. Both are placed in an essential discourse on the plurality of his work: the fools and monsters in the expression of paintings as well as in installation and performance art works.

The way he experiences the installation art media is equivalent to experiencing local traditions such as celebration ceremonies. The main thing of this media is not what is offered in the rituals, but the moment when the people who eagerly look forward to encountering with each other within the circle of the medium, then continue to open up a dialogue, share information and communicate. He operates the practice of performance and installation art by using “various perceptions and paradigms of people who own many kinds of paradigms”. He once explained it with a metaphor of a cake, “If we see culture as a cake and art

expression is one piece of that cake, therefore creating artworks should be considered as slicing a cake. Thus, slicing the cultural cake to pieces through process of art creation can be seen as emptying the culture...”³

Rather than emptying and taking away culture from the people, Heri Dono takes a great deal of filling in his works – especially in his performances – with the notion of happiness and liberation for the ‘performers’ – the marginal people who are being pushed to the peripheries of the urban life, trishaw drivers, *jatilan* (traditional theater) players, drop-out scholars. In his grotesque-looking, anti-plot and anti-screenplay performances – just as in his paintings – his art concept entertains particularly to the performers themselves, a kind of a social catharsis that he wants to spread out as an enlightenment to the audience.

In this exhibition, Heri Dono reviews the theses and main themes that had been presented in his installation and performance works, to be reinterpreted in his paintings. It is his way to prove that painting – that old fashioned medium – has not yet come to an end and still manages to become an important medium for contemporary artists. Creating installation and performance art works for Heri Dono is neither an effort to “escape”, nor to surrender himself entirely to insanity for finally ending up losing himself.

Now, beholding Heri Dono’s paintings, for a minute we can imagine the puppet master (*dalang*) putting his loony *wayangs* inside a square box – a painting “box”. The performers and the crew withdraw for a while, and as a *dalang* he now directs and performs the entire play in his paintings, on his own.

The following excerpt is a fragment of a conversation with Heri Dono in his house in Yogyakarta, end of last May, to complete the introduction of this exhibition, “Heri Provokes Heri”:

Hendro Wiyanto (HW): Do you have a theory about painting?

Heri Dono (HD): Yes, I do have a theory about painting. A painting is the same as a personal letter. Painting is a medium of individual expression, done individually, not involving other people, either to sketch or contribute ideas. It was called pure art in the past, because it didn’t compromise with the likes of others. But that doesn’t mean that it can’t be experimental. Yet, such experiments like that still dwell in the two-dimensional space, that’s why it is still called painting.

In painting, I think that the creativity, the area, is an area of innovation, an area of developments, new apprehensions, a testimony of life – referring to either personally or issues outside that area, whether it’s social, political, cultural and so on.

HW: Is the essence of painting more to the individuality or the two dimensional aspect?

HD: Physically, the two-dimensional aspect. Essentially, it is an individual expression. I am categorizing it because there are other categories, such as performance and installation art. Such works are done collaboratively and collectively. And other people can be involved in ideas, expressions, and it doesn't have to be two-dimensional. Even though it also doesn't mean that it must be non-two-dimensional, whereas experiments in installation and performance art can be operated upon a two-dimensional space as well, but it would not be painting, I guess.

I don't want to insist to blend everything into two dimensions. If we talk about installation or performance, the characteristics is more to 'inventiveness'. When speaking of visual art, I make those two categories for not making up things.

For in painting itself there is a lot of problems, problems around technicalities, themes, ideas, perceptions, form, there is so much that can be explored through painting. I regard painting as a conventional form, technically it can be transformed into three dimensions, but it can't be seen from all angles.

HW: Is it so?

HD: It might be possible, but I also work on *wayangs*, *wayangs* can be seen from both sides, right? But I don't want to insist that it also becomes a painting. The expression is different.

HW: Should we hold on to such conventions?

HD: I think about cases like between video art and *wayang*. It is about screen. *Wayang* uses wood. Video art uses glass. The problem is *wayang* is often considered old-fashioned, out of date. But actually the essence is the screen. It can also be made with smoke, hologram, and many things to express the visualization, so it will attract people to see it, let's say. Essentially, it's the same... not because wood is regarded ancient, and glass is regarded modern, It is the exploration, wooden screen may not be worst than video artists exploring glass...

HW: So there is still something worth fighting for in painting?

HD: I think so. There is still a lot to be explored. For example, Rudi Mantovani. The exploration is still inside the context of painting. The next thing is how to operate it technically. But there are also other artists dealing with other stuff like comics, cartoons, *wayangs*, it's so various.

When I work on my own, that's the interesting point. Let's say if I have friends around me, I won't say, please paint this, of course it's not like that. When it comes to installations, if they come around they know what to do with the medium.

Individuality becomes precious. Individual freedom is the important thing. Because when one talks about human rights, one can say that personal expression is very essential, it is there where artists get their ultimate freedom, whether you want to create ten heads or a hundred hands, even though that would not be a new idea...

HW: Is it true that when cave paintings were discovered, painting itself had already ended. The essence was already there, on those cave paintings?

HD: It's the same as painting on paper. Perhaps a hundred years from now people would still be writing on paper, but would it be regarded ancient? The content is very important. Some might say, painting is not contemporary, installation is. What actually matters is what the content is. I'd say for instance, Basquiat painted on walls, although people had painted bison on cave walls way before, but then there came graffiti languages, slangs, that can communicate to lower-class people... and that is effective enough. More important, that is also art, esthetical.

HW: Hasn't the problem been altered, from the medium to the content?

HD: If one paints on caves, trains, walls, I think that there's a content which he takes side on, and tries to communicate to.

HW: How to differ the contemporary painting and the non-contemporary one?

HD: It depends on the artist. If when he paints he says: "I'm a surrealist or pop art and so on, I'm an artist of whatever-ism", it would be hard to say that he's contemporary. He's already christened himself in the system of modernism. But if he does care about any of those existing isms, what matters is to relate to the problems that's existing at the present, and that can be a starting point of his expression, that's the important thing, whether he'd be regarded mediocre or not.

It would be more substantial if the credo goes to the most actual phenomenon which is happening at the present, doesn't matter if he would be regarded old-fashioned or corny for taking such 'local' inspiration, which in the past was considered traditional or primitive, I think that's just it... as long as he doesn't categorize himself into a certain ism... That's my opinion on contemporary painting. Probably Basquiat

himself didn't even think about such things before, about to which group he belonged to.. Maybe he just didn't get accepted at all, as well as perhaps Keith Haring or whoever.

HW: Can you describe the development of your work, from painting, installation to performance?

HD: I started in 1977 with experiments. I have been interested in cartoons since then. The association of the medium is varied, could be cartoons. The most essential thing from cartoons are flatness, two-dimensional and distortion. And it was when there was only one channel on TV – which is flat as well. We didn't have too many paradigms at that time. If you thought differently from others, that was enough to be called radical.

During the time when I studied at ASRI, everybody had to follow the rules. At that time I tried to make three-dimensional works. I filled my house with bells. I wanted to give exercise to my ears to hear sounds, see the essences of sounds. Here the sounds were produced by winds, not machines. And then I created another artwork with an aquarium and a fan, for the essence was that those things could also produce motion.

I have many friends from other fields, like music – Sutanto for instance, and also from dance and theater. At that moment I realized that the arts had many mediums, not only painting. I interacted with many kinds of arts. From that point, if I create art, I don't think too much if it's sculpture or music or whatever. It's the purpose that matters. Whether sound or some mechanical gadgets, I don't really think of whether it might be called installation or performance art, for what I do is based on the purpose.

When I paint, some interesting points come out if I express something with, let's say, things that some people have been doing since long time. For instance, Sastrogambar's glass paintings, or like Citro Waluyo. Generally, on glass paintings, cars are pictured smaller than houses. It's a very unique dimension. If you want to put a train in front of a house, the train will be pictured very small, like a toy. Because if it's big, you won't be able to see the house, right? And they say it's normal, not surrealist. And then there's a head got a foot stepped on it. Afterwards I see a Balinese *rerajahan* (a type of traditional Balinese scripture-drawing), for example. Suddenly a hand grows out of a head. From the *rerajahan* I notice how such things are treated as natural, flat. But behind it there are dimensions of thoughts, madness. You can see suddenly there's fire burns out of a genital.

HW: You tend to present installation and performance works more than paintings in international forums, don't you?

HD: I present paintings as well. When I exhibited them in foreign countries, there was a certain point where my paintings set up a new tendency abroad. When in Vermont I created one work, then I applied some collage and they said it was done. When I created a sketch, they said it was done. When I gave some

colors, they asked how I would finish it. It also happened in Japan, America, Berlin. I do show my paintings, not only installations.

HW: Which one is more frequent? Do you show your paintings by request or your own will?

HD: When I had an exhibition in the States... They were flustered. The problem was about obscenity for there was an image of genitals on display. Even though it's a liberal country, images of genitals can be subject to censorship. When I talked them out about the "*lingga-yni*" (Javanese Phallus-Vagina conception), then they realized it was all about basic matters. Not pornography.

The Ludwig Foundation also asked me to make some paintings. I showed one entitled "Superman Learns To Wear Underpants", that I made in America. It became such a surprise as well for the Americans. This Asian artist had the guts to picture Superman learning to wear underpants. Superman is a legendary hero there. Well - I just got back from the post office, and then I created that "Superman" and anyhow they were not angry. They were surprised. Because this became interesting, people were questioning again, what is a hero?

HW: In painting, what we see actually is a projection of the artist's individuality. While in performance art, the audience and the artist share the same experience at the same moment. It's very different with painting. In painting there is a projection of the artist's feelings and intellectuality until the moment passes. And then audiences come to see it. In performance it's like the artist wants to drag the audience to enter the process. Like correcting the paradigm of painting.

HD: I guess what matters in painting, the audiences are trying to read. While in performance or installation art, the audiences are experiencing together. One is about reading, the other is about experiencing together. There must be a distance in reading, seeing the artist's paradigm of expressions in painting. The reader is also reading the visual icons in the visualizations, and reading himself as well.

Experiencing together, interpreting something at the same moment, between object and subject. The subject moves and so does the object. Because they both encounter the same phenomenon.

HW: Why do you want to reinterpret your installation and performance works into two dimensions? What's the notion behind this?

HW: If I make installations, I don't become an audience, but I'm involved in the process. If it's made individually, I'd like to propose a question, what's actually the substance from the installation and performance works that I make?

HW: Wouldn't it be the aspect of collaboration?

HD: More to if it becomes a visual record, in personal expressions. As a visual artist who also gets involved in painting, the past events I created in installations and performances can also be recorded as a testimony, like a bas-relief, reflections of explorations and creativity.

Let's say if I see objects in installation and performance art, the perception doesn't stop. Because the work continues to inspire. The works provoke me to reinterpret them... There are some works made like that, but they just end, they don't provoke the artist to do more creativity. It happens not only in installations but also in painting. Some paintings can provoke the artists to proceed their creativity explorations and some can't.

HW: How does this sort of provocation happen in performance art?

HD: I just see the recordings. For example, "The Chair".... I look back to the issues of seats, positions, masterminds (*dalang*)... since at that time I was being taught by Sukasman about *wayang* art. But the problem was, this kind of *dalang* also became a *wayang* in the Suharto era. The *dalangs* became an extension of the government's hands, with 75% of their message contents filled with the government's propaganda. To think that behind the scene, the *dalang* has the highest position to direct the *wayangs*. In politics, this behind-the-scene position seems to be a big deal.

If I create a performance, the *dalang* at the backstage and the *dalang* on the political position are facing each other. They all become puppets, *wayang*. The figures are attached with loudspeakers, chairs, radio, alarm clocks, all mechanically.

HW: In what way do they provoke?

HD: The general characteristics. Before Reformation, Indonesians like me were different. To interpret something didn't have to be in painting. The symbols had to be interpreted in other forms. Take *Serat Centini* (ancient Javanese scripture), for instance, if it's interpreted into the present-day visualization, there'll be lots of restrictions, if they want to interpret it into music or a play... Taboo scenes were not described verbally in words. In some certain chapters they were described into shades of imageries...Imagine it in songs, let's say?

HW: Aren't three-dimensional objects more provocative than paintings?

HD: This is about provoking myself. I agree that in *wayang* performances there's a dialogue of fear, traditional issues and militarism, and the audience listens to the dialogue. I don't know how they'll do it in dancing, what might be the objective? While in painting, it creates a very long distance. But I considered that individual expression is also a form of individual freedom. So you can't say just because it's painting so it's not regarded as contemporary.

HW: Wouldn't it tend to reduction? Is it not considered as a sort of a new trap? It's too easy for an artist of your class to do this kind of thing.

HD: Probably a reduction might happen. Next time I'll ask some of my friends who have been assisting me, how do they see my paintings. What do they interpret? That's also interesting, to see other people's thoughts. When a painting's done, then I ask them to reinterpret it, what does the painting mean?

¹ The excerpts from this introduction is taken from an interview with Heri Dono, 31 May and 1 June 2002, in Yogyakarta.

² See Apinan Poshyananda, “Heri Dono: Bizarre Dalang, Javanese Bricoleur, Low-Tech Wizard” (“Dancing Demons and Drunken Deities”, The Japan Foundation Asia Centre, catalogue, 2002)

³ See Jim Supangkat, “Context” (“Dancing Demons and Drunken Deities”, The Japan Foundation Asia Centre, catalogue, 2002)