Hendro Wiyanto

On Whips

The first thing I remember is a whip. This frightening whip was in the hands of Sardono W. Kusomo, a celebrated dancer, who that night was wearing the costume of a simple horse cart driver. The event that night was the opening of a visual art exhibition entitled *Knalpot* (*muffler*) (May 1 – July 31, 1999), which marked the official opening of the new Cemeti Art House on Jalan DI Panjaitan 41, Yogyakarta. Since that historical opening, the name "Contemporary Art Gallery", which for years had stuck to Cemeti, was officially changed to Cemeti Art House or *Rumah Seni Cemeti*.[1]

And among those attending, most of who were from the Yogyakartan young artist crowd, this brief performance by Sardono that opened the exhibition with the cracking of a whip created surprise, as well as a sharp noise in their ears. The opening of the *Knalpot* exhibition, accompanied as it was by the cracking of a whip, felt very Yogyanese.

In this brief article, I will attempt to elucidate on this "whip" affair, in celebration of a contemporary visual art gallery that has succeeded in creating a recognised public and environment for its artists over the past 15 years.

Whips and the Gallery as a Gesture

What signals are created by (the sound of) a whip in a gallery space, wielded powerfully not by a real horse cart driver, but by a skilled dancer moving his body to open an exhibition at the leading gallery in Yogya, in Indonesia in fact?

By nature of its increasingly specific role and function in the development of modern visual art, visual art gallery space has truly gone beyond its physical limits as a bound or restricted cube. An awareness has slowly permeated the entire space: the gallery walls have become the foundation, the floor a pedestal, its corners axes, its roof a solid sky. This white cube has become nothing less than "art in all its possibilities". More than just a site or a subject, exhibition space or empty space in a gallery may even be seen to function as a "gesture" that has certain transcendental or spiritual qualities. Such a gallery space with all its claims to art, full of such elastic space that we may liken it to a mind, may be called the "greatest discovery of Modernism".[2]

To occupy a space that has gone beyond physical boundaries that had previously confined it, Sardono W. Kusomo gave it meaning by using a whip. It was as if the terrifying sound of a whip in the gallery space was intended to lash one's thoughts, penetrate a vacuum, and explode all our ideas about space as if they were empty seeds.

The scene Sardono whipped up in the gallery space reminds me of what pop artist and judo practitioner Yves Klein did, entering a gallery space through a second-floor window, unscathed. In doing this, Yves Klein was said to have been in the pursuit of "a dimensionless, nameless world, while at the same time trying to convey the endless, yet limited, ways of entering this (gallery) space". This event occurred on April 28, 1958 at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. Sardono's whip exploded in the Cemeti Art House gallery space amidst the artist crowd, and Klein did a rather risky freefall from a great height down into an empty gallery space. These examples demonstrate how the meaning of gallery space has extended beyond the physical boundaries of an exhibition space; they illustrate its function as a "gesture".

Exhibitions and performances by FX Harsono and Tisna Sanjaya in Cemeti Gallery and Cemeti Art House also show how these contemporary artists view gallery space in different ways.

At his solo exhibition, *Burning Victims* (1998), at Cemeti Gallery, Harsono presented a performance outside the gallery space, which involved burning up images of figures, carved from wood that were clutching placards bearing cynical messages about the brutal violence of May 1998. The end product of this performance was then moved into the gallery as a work of art. The recording of this performance and the process of the making of this "work of art" were translated into video documentation and aesthetic objects that appeared in the gallery. Although the public outside the gallery were crucial to this performance and the creation of this work of art, its claim to art was not conveyed by the public outside the gallery, but by a gesture within the gallery itself. What was witnessed by the public "on the outside" would be interpreted very differently from what was to be found "on the inside".

For FX Harsono, what exists "on the outside" and what exists "on the inside" are of equal importance. He wrote: "... I see the gallery as a point or location that is connected or has a connection, real or otherwise, with the public space in which the performance takes place.... Then the performance is taken inside the gallery space...."[3]

Tisna Sanjaya made a performance entitled *Art and Soccer*

Exhibition 'Knalpot', Hedi Hariyanto, It's ok if you want to flatus, but..., 450 x 310 x 205 cm, 1999, mixed media | exhibition 'Knalpot', Anusapati, Empty Nest, 1999, tree, oil lamps


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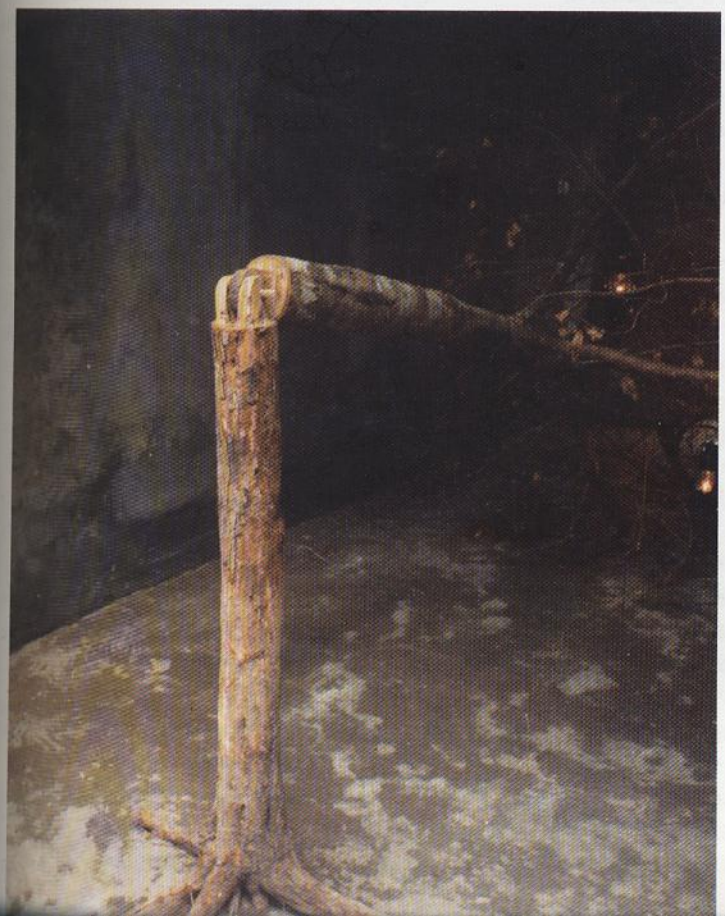
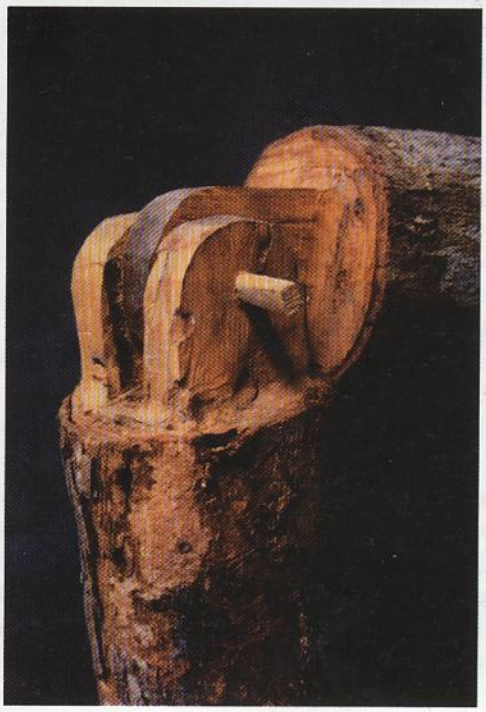




for Peace at Cemeti Art House (2000). Tisna used the gallery space as the location for registration and technical meetings of the players who would take part in the football matches. The gallery space was used to "deposit" the visual art works, paintings on woven bamboo room dividers. Rather like what Harsono did, these works were then shifted to cordon off and decorate the football pitch. The football players' feet were washed by Tisna Sanjaya in the gallery space as a token of fair-play, and Tisna Sanjaya stood at the edge of the pitch acting as commentator for the entire week the matches were in progress.

The 10-minute rests were used to "repair" paintings on the woven bamboo that had been dented by the ball. In this example of Tisna Sanjaya's performance, the gallery space transforms into a gesture of the conviction and hopes the artist has for the relationship between art, play and peace. Gallery space is nothing for the visual art of Tisna Sanjaya.

Tisna Sanjaya wrote, ".... I used the gallery as a place for preliminary meetings between the football team and the *boneks* or *bobotoh* (football supporters) of each of the players. Also for meetings between regular viewers of exhibitions at Cemeti Art House who normally encounter their cultural community in a different habitat from that of the world of football.
The paintings or art works that were produced were given to the spectators, to be used as room dividers, toilet seats, notice boards, prayer room dividers, to dry rice, or even as firewood..."[4]

Both artists defined the gallery space or Cemeti Art House by expanding it but at the same time blurring it, emphasising it but at the same time almost annihilating it.

Another example is that of the action by Daniel Buren, a European artist, who was regarded as being the most sensitive to "the political space of the gallery". Buren closed Galleria Apollinaire in Milan in October 1968 while his exhibition was still in progress. He pasted white and green strips of cloth across the door. The idea was that these lines or strips would neutralise art by making it devoid of content. The viewers outside the gallery were forced to reflect not on his art, but on the gallery, as a motif.

Daniel Buren understood that the gallery or the white cube was nothing more than a symptom of a confused social organ, an agent even that contained a poison (art) that was isolated within it, which had no meaning. With these strips, Buren parodied the style of formalist art, which had succeeded in identifying the meaning of a work of art with the work itself, thereby detracting from the "substance" of the work itself.[5]

The House Inside and the House Outside

If artists interpret the gallery as a gesture, then we must interpret as a gesture the whip used by Sardono at Cemeti Art House that night.

The structure of the traditional *limasan*-style building at Cemeti Art House that forms the entrance to the main exhibition space conveys a sense of floating: it is as if the full weight of the building is not resting on the earth. It is the low pedestals or bases of the four columns of the *limasan*, which are made from a combination of reinforced concrete, wood and steel, which seem to support the entire weight of the structure. So, this *limasan* is like a carriage, and the whip is something that is in the hands of the driver.

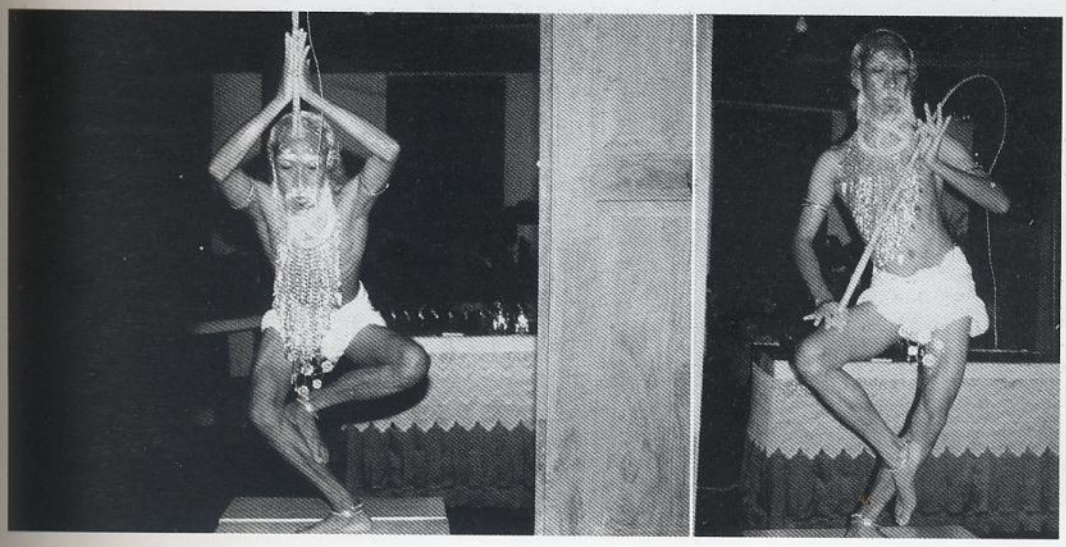
Imagining the sound of the whip that opening night, I am reminded of the parable about horses and coachmen in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Are artists the horses that needed to be whipped by Sardono that night?

In *Phaedrus*, Plato composed the famous parable about the triform essence of the soul. So, to be able to reconsider the world of ideas that is seen as the real world, the soul joins the gods as the driver of a two-horse chariot. Plato compared the rational element to a coach driver, while the spirited and appetitive elements are more like the two horses that pull the battle chariot.

One of the horses is depicted as a good horse, representing the true association between common sense, love of respect, simplicity and humility. The other horse is the bad one, symbolising want or desire, which go hand in hand with chaos and conceit. If the good horse does what the driver wants it to do, the bad horse tends to be disobedient, obeying only the voice of desire, so that it has to be controlled by the coachman's whip.[6]

To what part or element of the artist crowd in the gallery were the lashes of Sardono's whip directed? It is pointless to try to find an answer to this question, because the whip was not targeted towards any particular object.

But I am reminded of the statement made by the prominent artist, Marina Abramovic about the role of an artist as a public servant. She emphasised that there were really two parts to this job: cleaning "the house inside" and "the house outside".



One day, Marina Abramovic was on a train journey, sitting with and talking to a rabbi. An old man was sitting nearby listening closely to their discussion. The old man had worked in a crematorium for 40 years; a job that had only involved cremating the dead. What the old man told them came as a great shock to Marina Abramovic. Forty years ago, the temperature used to cremate the dead was just 125 degrees. But now, that was not hot enough for a cremation; an even higher temperature of 715 degrees was now required because there were more and more chemicals inside the human body.[7]

If Sardono's whip that night had been directed at art and or artists, then it seems that this could be interpreted as a gesture of warning that it was the job of art clean the "house inside" and the "house outside", which today are becoming permeated more and more by the pollution referred to by Marina Abramovic. Was the exhibition that was opened by a whip that night not entitled *Knalpot (muffler),* a piece of equipment that spouts out from its mouth all kinds of junk into the "house outside"?

Will, as Marina Abramovic believed, present day visual art join in the effort to "clean up", or will it unwittingly play a part in dirtying "the house inside" and "the house outside"? Isn't it necessary to empty the gallery exhibition space sometimes, so that all we can hear is the sound of the whip?

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(Footnotes)

[1]The name "Contemporary Art Gallery" was used from March 1994, before which, since its opening on January 31, 1988, had been "Cemeti Modern Art Gallery".

[2]Brian O' Doherty, "The Gallery as a Gesture", in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (Routledge, 1999 (reprinted).

[3]E-mail interview with FX Harsono, August 27, 2003.

[4]E-mail interview with Tisna Sanjaya, August 12, 2003

[5]Brian O' Doherty, *ibid.*

[6]Quoted from "The Psychology of Plato" in *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. I, Frederick Copleston, SJ, The Bellarmine Series.

[7]Quoted from *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy, from Competition to Compassion*, edited by Louwrien Wijers, Academy Editions, 1996.