

## Agus Suwage

### The Infinite Body

By Ade Tanesia

Look closely at the mug shots on official Indonesian identity cards, like citizenship cards, driving licenses and passports. Most portray faces that are tense and formal; if there's a smile at all (and the regulations specify that there shouldn't be), it usually looks tight and forced. There seems to be a psychological strain involved in facing a camera for many people. Maybe it's because they want to look their best in the image of 'self' that the photo reveals. Isn't a photograph a way to capture a moment to be remembered forever? To keep the best memories in your life alive?

Despite the tension that it may evoke, people are always interested in having their portraits done. The photographic studios and roadside portrait painters never seem to go out of business. The legendary realist painter Basuki Abdullah (1915-1992) was renowned for his ability to make a person's face more beautiful than the original. Generally, having a portrait made—whether in a painting or in a photograph—is a way for us to make ourselves look better than we do in real life. That's unless you happen to be an artist who toys with his own face and body, unburdened by matters of beauty or ugliness, by what's nice and what's not. That artist is Agus Suwage—a multi-talented visual artist who, for the better part of the last ten years, has been turning every part of his body into inspirations for artworks.

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The tradition of self-portraiture is not alien to modern painters, in either the East or the West. In the history of modern Indonesian art, many artists have produced self-portraits, including the late Kusuma Affandi (1907-1990), one of the country's most legendary painters. But no one else in the country has explored his own face and body to communicate ideas as intensively as Suwage.

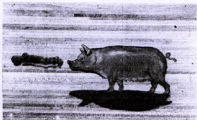
According to curator, Hendro Wiyanto, explorations of the body have been made extensively by performing artists, as well as by a number of surrealists such as Lucia Hartini and Ivan Sagito. But he says that Suwage is outstanding in the contemporary art scene because he places his body into his work—not just as a representation of himself, but of his self in relation to the social and political contexts that touch his life. He is also known for the invention of an unusual process of working that involves photography, performance, painting, sculpture and graphic design as well as the most contemporary print media techniques.

Agus Suwage was born in Purworejo, Central Java in 1959. He studied graphic design at the Bandung Institute of Technology in West Java, a part of his life and education that deeply affected his

future work. He is often quoted as saying: "I was lucky not to go into the pure arts."

From his perspective, entering the pure arts (that is, the fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, as opposed to applied arts like graphic and computer design), with all the rules and regulations of the training process, might have robbed him of his creativity. After more than a decade of experience working as a graphic designer in Jakarta, he became increasingly liberated in his use of materials, while refining his expertise in communicating ideas through signs. He is unfettered by the need to dig for originality in his works, as artists are taught they must do in the schools of pure arts. Instead, he seems to celebrate the thousands of visuals that he appropriates, assimilates and then processes into something that belongs to him alone. He is prolifically creative—between 1996 and 2004, he mounted over 15 solo and group exhibitions both in Indonesia and abroad, in Japan, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia.

Suwage's explorations are not limited to his face; they include his entire body. To begin, he usually makes sketches of poses and then realises them in the form of photographs, which later become the main inspiration for paintings and three-dimensional artworks. Wiyanto describes what Suwage does as



Sol & Luna Series (i-vi) (2004)

'pantomime body movements', frozen by photography and transformed into a variety of different forms.

As the artist explains it: "The beginning was very simple. In Jakarta in 1995, I was sharing a house with a photographer, Erik Prasetya. Erik often photographed me in a range of gestures and poses. Then sometimes I would make drawings from the photos that resulted. Aren't we our own least expensive models? I didn't have to spend money to pay a model, did I? When I moved to Jogjakarta, of course, Erik was no longer there. So in the end I made the portraits myself, or my wife was the one to take the picture. Once, I was posing naked with coils of cable and small lights fastened all over my body. Suddenly, my wife got a telephone call: *wah*, the heat, I was half dead because of those lamps."

For Suwage, playing with his own body is a profoundly interesting process in itself. He is not shy at all. In the paintings *Doggy Style* (2004) and *Beauty bin the Beast* (2004) the artist poses as a dalmatian; in *Holy Dog* (2004) Suwage, in full canine makeup and with a halo above his head, pants with his tongue hanging out. In *Tukang Sulap dari Selatan* [Magician from the South] (2004), his face displays a look of bemusement as he observes the white rabbits sprouting from the top of his head. These are just a few examples of the hundreds of poses he has explored—Suwage manages to subjugate his body into an endlessly versatile medium of artistic expression. For me, this is extraordinary, considering the cultural meanings of the body in the Indonesian

context, particularly in Java. From a very early age, it seems, the body is separated from its owner by the word '*malu*' (shame, shyness or embarrassment). In general, little children—both boys and girls—must quickly learn to cover up their naked bodies with the reasoning that later, they'll feel *malu* if other people should see them.

Wiyanto says that, in Indonesian culture, the body is perceived only as 'flesh' and is the source of all sorts of taboo. Is this why there are so few visual artists in Indonesia who explore the body as the inspiration for their artworks? He suggests that the idea that art must fulfil a social role in society is the traditional legacy of the fine arts in Indonesia. This may help to explain why the majority of contemporary Indonesian visual artists prefer to explore forms and ideas that exist outside themselves.

Well before he became famous for his exploratory self portraits, Suwage tackled many themes in his work that were critical of the socio-political conditions of the New Order regime. His mesmerizing drawings became icons for pro-democracy activists in Indonesia. When the demands came for Suharto to step down, which ended with the collapse of his regime, many parties were busy blaming other people. Questions welled up in him: "Wasn't I also part of the past? Didn't I also take part in perpetuating the oppression?... If you want to fix the world, where must you begin? My father used to say, 'Start with yourself!' So where must we begin?"



Holy Dog (2004)



Tukang Sulap Dari Selatan (2004)

He has discovered his own visual answer, in his own form, face and body: "What I am expressing is not just about myself. Rather, I am borrowing from my body to talk about a variety of issues outside myself."

Suway has made a great leap forward—exactly at the time when the fine artists of Indonesia are busy raising social and political issues, he is aware of the possibility that these issues no longer have their once-pure fighting spirit. He sees that social and political themes in Indonesia have become an exotic discourse, commoditised by Indonesian and foreign curators alike. He expressed this vision eloquently in his exhibition, *Eksotika dotkom* in 2000. The critique was transparent in such works as *Circus Democracy* and *Eksotika dotkom*, which featured, among other things, 14 wooden logs painted with symbols of Coca-Cola; military cloth inscribed with the words 'Last Genocide'; and images of his own bleeding face, along with the figure of Che Guevara. All of these signs have become exotic and sellable objects, no different from Coca-Cola. While the artist conveyed cynicism in many of the works in this exhibition, in others he took a distinctive stand. In works like *Aku Melibat, Aku Mendengar, Aku Merasa* [I See, I Hear, I Feel] (1994-2000) and *Ugly Self Portrait* (1997), he used elements of his own face and body to create images depicting him simultaneously as victim, holy person and evil-doer, thus driving home the message: instead of

criticising the authorities and corruptors, let's take a good look at ourselves. As he says: "In my work, I sometimes become the victim, sometimes the perpetrator and sometimes the one who enjoys the spectacle. I am [both] the actor and the spectator."

So, his works are not limited by a single extreme world view. He tries to see both the positive and negative sides of an issue, along with its potential for humour and the absurd. Several of the works in his 2003 exhibition, *Ough... Nguik* [Oink ... Oink], he featured himself a pig mask. "My *shio* [Chinese zodiac sign] is the pig. For me, the pig is a very comical animal and I don't completely understand why it is so reviled, always given a negative connotation in a lot of cultures," he says, scratching his head to mime his perplexity.

Themes of divinity also come up in his works. In a painting called *Mengintip Tuhan* [Spying on God] (2003), he depicts himself spying on something luminous, while his ear has turned an emphatic shade of red. It's as if the work is expressing how, despite the frequency with which we hear about 'God', we don't always know exactly who this God is. We then find the artist, dressed in a flowing robe, in another series of quasi-theological poses. In *Another Holy* (2003), he appears near a cloud, holding a halo around his head. Meanwhile, within the painting, printed in tiny script, we find the words: "Holy War, Holy Lord, Holy beer, Holy ghost". The word 'holy' is used abundantly, even in spaces that are usually considered unholy. This idea is expanded in the work *Holy Beer dan Kawan-Kawan* [Holy Beer and Friends]



Ugly Self Portrait (24 pieces) (1997)

(2003), in which the artist is portrayed standing in a glass with the words "holy beer" written on it, smiling broadly despite the flames burning on his head and shoulder. Etched into the glass in place of a brand name are the images of a cross and a crescent moon, the symbols of Christianity and Islam.

Each of Suwage's exhibitions is usually built around a grand theme. He says he prefers working this way: "I become more focused; it accelerates the work and also filters the new ideas that keep appearing at the same time. Aside from that, having one theme also facilitates the process of displaying the work. I think a lot about the display of the exhibition, because I want the viewers to be able to really appreciate it work by work," he says.

His most recent exhibition was *Toys "S" US*, which toured Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Bali and Jogjakarta. The show grew out of a discussion Suwage had with a Japanese artist called Okayama Naoyuki, whose work is inspired by children's toys. Their meeting reminded him of a variety of toys and games from his childhood, which are fast becoming obsolete. While composing the work for this exhibition, he seemed to go in and out, back and forth between the past and the present, between the

exhilaration of childhood and the reality that those pure joys are becoming increasingly rare as he grows older. "The longer [I live], the more interested I get in issues that are simpler, yet deeper," he says.

I brought along my daughter, who is three years old, to see the exhibition. All the works in this show were interactive and could be played with, so it's easy to imagine how happy this made the kids, especially given how hard it is for them to find spaces where they can play in the cities. Here, they could play with cars made of sardine cans, pull wires to make the winged figure of Suwage fly, or pump the nose of a Mickey Mouse skeleton, to name but a few of the malleable things displayed. Although these works were designed to be played with, their critical content was clear. In the work *D.I.Y. (Do It Your Self)* (2003), for example, Suwage constructed a mechanical gadget in which the viewer could view a series of photographs such that, by turning a crank, you would see the artist's face turn into a monkey's and then into the face of U.S. President, George Bush. "In this work, I was actually alluding to the hegemony of American products, which reaches [as far as] children's toys. The photo of George Bush, I just picked



Toys "R" US at Gaya Gallery in Ubud, November 2004

as a symbol of America. I also took the title of the exhibition from the American toy store, Toys 'R' US, which is found in all corners of the world," he explains.

Through his work, Agus Suwage has played out a diversity of roles. Most recently, he has reclaimed his childhood. As he blends his face and body into images that lend themselves to a thousand possible interpretations, we can share his life. He proves that the human face and body, even that of just one man, are a never-ending source for creative exploration.

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*(Translated from Indonesian by Latitudes.)*

