

AN
emeti

Years Cemeti Art House Exploring Vacuum



1988 - 2003



15 Years Cemeti Art House Exploring Vacuum

1988 The first opening at Cemeti with Heri Dono, Eddie Hara, Harry Wahyu and ourselves. Almost everybody has hung his or her works but there is still one empty piece of wall. Only 4 hours before the opening, we are getting a bit nervous because Heri Dono hasn't shown up with his works and Nindityo decides to cycle to his house and see what's happened. When he came back in two hours with Heri's works in a becak, Nindityo also brought the story that he found Heri sitting in the middle of his paintings on paper all laying on the floor around him, empty frames ready for use leaning against to the wall. Heri was confused and couldn't make up his mind, which work to put in the frame for the exhibition; he has been sitting there for hours thinking!

1988 Two hours before the first ever opening the electricity fails, I finish preparing the snacks by candlelight. Five minutes before the opening the light turns on!

1990 Boycott by becak drivers. We hear screaming outside, we look and see a becak passing by very fast with a tourist in it, that is screaming stop, stop, stop and without the becak slowing down jumps out onto the street!! A very heated tourist needs to be cooled down with a cold drink and fresh art.

1991 We have been staying in the Netherlands for one year, leaving the gallery to be run by 3 students/assistants. When we come back, a big motor-bike leaking oil, belonging to one of the boyfriends, is standing in the middle of the exhibition space, the sleeping rooms are packed with artworks and a very bad smell fills the space. The assistants didn't ask the artists to pick up their work after the monthly exhibitions were finished and when we cleaned up the spaces, besides all the rat shit, we found a rotten kitten.

1997 To obtain our official gallery permission we asked for a 'ijin usaha', a company license. With this company license, for starters we could bypass the police permission which was normally needed to screen art works before exhibiting (that was the standard rule during Suharto's period). During the last Suharto era election, in 1997, there was a rumour that no more than 5 people were allowed to gather. We curated the show 'slot in the box'; FX Harsono did his performance 'Victim / Destruction I'. Intelligence came to check the exhibition but luckily they were unable to 'read' works like Agung Kurniawan's 'The holy Family'.

1998 Demonstrations and Monetary crisis. We postponed building our new space - there was no 10 year celebration. The duration of exhibitions went to six weeks to have less expenses. During the riots

1989 We have to fight against the becak riders and guides, which operate as a mafia bringing tourists to Batik Galleries, charging 50 % of the selling price. They become angry with us because we only give them uang rokok (smoking fee) if they really bring a guest in and if we are fortunate enough to sell a work. We are constantly fighting with them because they don't understand the difference between the batik shops and our gallery. One of the guys came in one morning with a big knife to impress me. After we got him out by explaining once more that we are also working on a commission base, we decided not to give anything to the guides anymore. We made a plaque at the entrance "sorry, no commissions".

and demonstrations in May, we exhibited the Japanese artist Shigeo Kobayashi and we had to get her on a plane leaving Indonesia after the Japanese Embassy recalled its citizens. In Sept. 1998 we started in a new venue at Jl. Panjaitan.

1999 1st May, official opening of Cemeti Art House, with the Knalpot exhibition. A few days before the opening, the new building was inaugurated by a selamatan (special ceremony), installing a mask at the entrance and the birds in the cages for protection. Tono and Kelik, two boys from the neighborhood started their new job as night guards. In the morning we receive interesting stories that they can't sleep in the back space because they are woken and disturbed by a woman who embraces them in their sleep. The house ghost! They see more ghosts in and near the well, and a friend with special exorcism powers is asked to come and 'clean' the space of its former 'inhabitants'. Ghosts are seen in the well and in the stock room. Small stones are put in every corner in the hope that they won't bother us any more. They are probably still appearing happily, because every Thursday the boys put an offering near the well.

1999 We were preparing to bring the Knalpot exhibition to the Museum Puri Lukisan in Bali, when we received a letter signed by the Taring Padi president stating that they had decided in their meeting that they would not allow two artists members of Taring Padi, Nerfita Primadewi and Aris Prabowo, who joined the Knalpot exhibition at Cemeti, to join the Knalpot exhibition in Bali. Their reason - it is a mainstream art center and they are philosophically opposed to exhibiting in such institutions.

2000 The contribution provided by comments of the public within the country throws up challenging and provocative general assumptions. For example, Cemeti Gallery was dubbed an extension of the mainstream, an agent of international trend, a new alternative, an advocate of internationalisation; so feeding the gossip among Indonesian collectors; ABC (Asal Bukan Cemeti) "as long as it is not Cemeti".

2002 The Head of police at the nearby police office enters the Cemeti Art House: "How can you guarantee that there is no drug dealing in your gallery on opening nights? Don't you need protection

2001 A new phenomena of visitors are coming to our opening and others in Yogyakarta, namely: the Snackers. Young students take as many snacks as they can hold, leaving empty plates on the table a few minutes after they are put there. Now we have to circulate with the snacks to make sure that everybody gets some!

Anecdotes



from us?" they ask. Nindityo is always very adept at talking to the police in such a way that we don't become victims of their extortion. His answer is: "I'll send you an invitation every month, so you can check that people aren't dealing drugs." Since then we have sent them the invitations every month, and they leave us alone.

2003 I am in a residency program in Singapore and miss the opening of Ruang Rupa. After the opening I received a distressed e-mail from Nindit; Ruang Rupa had a big party the night before as part of their work, but it ended in total chaos with food smashed on the wall, a drunken Teddy who dived on the table full of dirty plates and a lot a noise for the neighbors to deal with. Nindityo wrote that he could relax only after 3.00 a.m., when he realized that the police hadn't come to shut Cemeti or catch him.He wrote: "Now I am confused what to do because Ruang Rupa wants to leave the mess rotting in the space for the whole month, lots of rats and maggots will appear, and it will be smelly! Don't be mad at me!"



Mella Jaarsma



15 years of Cemeti Art House, time for chewing the cud

Cemeti hits the horse – Cemeti in Sanskrit means whipping a horse. Off they go, the artists and the audience, let them run in different directions, bumping into each other, falling, neighing (whinnying) and getting up again. Now it is time for ruminating and re-thinking direction and speed.

From the moment Cemeti Gallery first opened its doors on the 31st of January 1988, until its name was changed to Cemeti Art House early 1999, its policy was generally focused on promoting and discovering artists (actively working artists) including in terms of concept, the idioms they articulated, the techniques used and choice of media. In practice, this was effective and contextual for the 80s generation. A wave of tourism, internationalism and global issues, which at that time spread like a welcome mat, helped give the gallery's curatorial policy room to function.

With the lack of an established art infrastructure in Indonesia, working without clear criteria and boundaries, visual artists work relatively autonomously; not so much ensnared by the criteria of museums, curators, the media and government support. But this independent situation creates the urgent need for 'private initiatives' and is partly the foundation for the lively art-scene we are working in, especially in Yogyakarta. Whilst it started as a small artists' initiative (Nindityo and I are still practicing artists), Cemeti is often no longer seen as the 'alternative', but as an established art institution, due to our long breadth of 15 years existence. What are we alternative to, if there is no establishment except commercial galleries?

At least eleven exhibition projects have been organized each year, including solo exhibitions and group exhibitions; add to this performances, site-specific and art happenings, discussions, presentations, and artists' talks, as well as exhibitions and projects in other venues and abroad. Something that started as a very locally oriented art concern developed into an international art network. Our broadening of the circle of networking was parallel to technical developments of the communication system available in Indonesia.

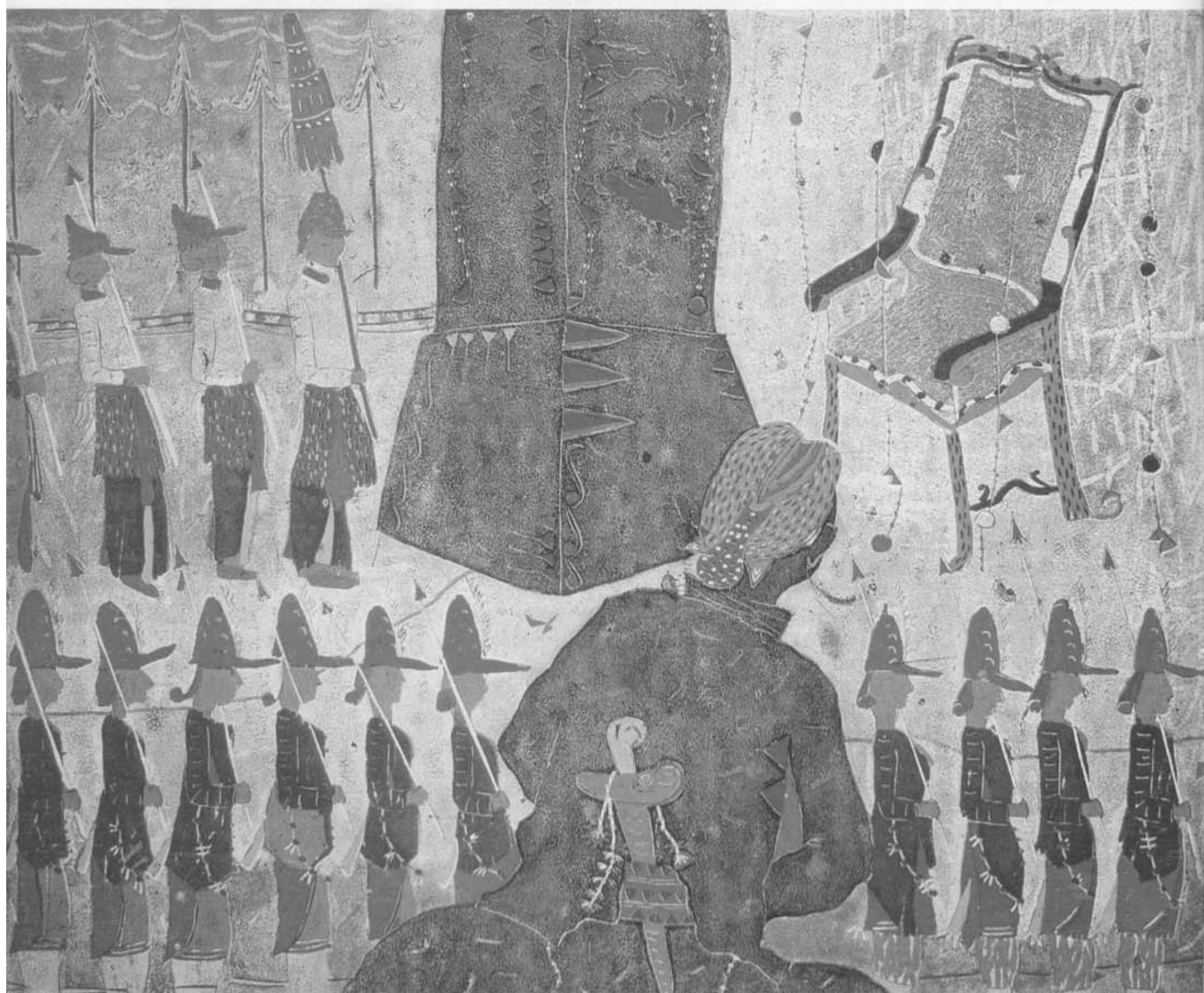
Some romantic reviews:

When we started in the Ngadisuryan location we printed silkscreen invitations by hand and delivered them by bicycle. The first three years that we managed the gallery we didn't have a telephone. Besides that we couldn't afford it, there was also nobody to call, because very few had telephones at that time! Communication was through letters or if urgent by telegrams. In 1991 we got a telephone connection as did many others in Yogya; in 1992 a fax machine; in 1995 our first computer and finally internet connection in 1999. Very significant changes have taken place in these 15 years of art discourse in Java, Asia and globally. The essays in this book reflect these changes from so many interesting references.

Given that art is an unstable system, the self-image of the artist and his/her role in society is always changing, and has more to do with reactions to this society rather than valuing art in itself. Cemeti operated for exactly 10 years in the Suharto era and we are now 5 years on. Many artists

exhibited by Cemeti grew up in the Suharto era and were very much concerned with the political situation that they critiqued through their art practices. The days of a common enemy have passed and commenting on the social and political circumstances through revolt or provocation is no longer the only way. The recent discussions and art discourses show us very clearly the need to comment and react on a sensible level, with awareness / consciousness of current problems related to the local situation and seen in the perspective of the global market / neo-liberal developments. Artists are no longer only studio workers but are looking for ways to empower themselves and some work relative to specific communities. Education, research and historical methodologies are questioned and reinvented. Non-artists are also using 'art tools' for bridging social activities from different perspectives. The local art field we are working in, and that set up by Cemeti Art House, can be furthered by not only operating as a platform for the latest movements, but going into more depth by stimulating and facilitating specific projects and connecting artists with other professionals. This means in the realization of these changes, we need more people to conceptualize and guide these projects.

We are also reconsidering the necessity of our main objective of monthly changing exhibitions. Is it still relevant to expect the audience / public to take the initiative to come to an exhibition place, or does the artist have to create their own space and projects on the spot where the audience is? This means in the extreme; the artists have to go to the public instead of



Raihul Fadjri

The Miracle of 7a Ngadisuryan Street



It was the first half of the 1990s when I accompanied Jim Supangkat, an art critic and curator, to visit Cemeti Gallery on Ngadisuryan Street, number 7A, Yogyakarta. Jim Supangkat was still a journalist then. It was my first visit to the Gallery that was modest and simple. A sign that read "contemporary art" was printed on a name board posted in front of the building. The actual gallery occupied just half of a leased house.

The exhibition space measured only seven by four metres, and two other rooms functioned as a stock room and a sleeping room. However, everything was orderly. As I remember, the Gallery just had a one-person staff then.

Since that first visit, I often visited Cemeti Gallery and regularly received invitations to attend exhibition openings every month. I became interested in reporting art activities. As a journalist who knew virtually nothing about art, I found Nindityo and Mella invaluable as they helped me by patiently answering all of my uninformed questions. It was then that I was exposed to the term "contemporary art". I did not really get any elaborate notion of the term; the easiest thing for me to grasp was that it referred to works not popular in the art market. I was enticed. There is pride and sympathy in siding with the unpopular.

My frequent visits to the Gallery familiarised me with the ambience of the leased house and its occupants. They were so kind, showing genuine respect and full attention to their guests. They would offer me something to drink, then prepare and serve it themselves. "What would you like? Tea, coffee, plain water?" Nindityo would always ask as soon as I was

seated in a chair in the exhibition space. There were times when I thought that their kindness had something to do with my being a reporter and my host's wish that I would publicise the exhibitions at his Gallery. However, the same hospitality prevailed for other visitors to the Gallery. All this was despite the fact that at first I had found myself unfamiliar with Nindityo's style of friendliness, quite different from that of the typical Javanese.

I also witnessed how Nindityo and Mella handled all the Gallery's activities themselves (with the help of an assistant). Most impressive to me was how they devised file boxes, meticulously made from cardboard.

I saw that such simple ways in managing the Gallery really made sense as there was not much money coming in from selling works unpopular in the art market. Who on earth, then, wanted to buy the prints, drawings, or even oil paintings, of young, not yet famous artists, for millions of rupiah? Let alone buy installations. However, it was these kinds of works that Cemeti Gallery exhibited. "We have to refuse commissions to guides bringing tourists to this Gallery," Nindityo once said. Cemeti Gallery was in a neighbourhood scattered with small batik galleries that paid commissions to tourist guides who brought customers to them.

Mella and Nindityo's determination to be consistent with their ideals was touching. However, I thought that it would be difficult for a gallery with such an unpopular orientation to survive if it had to live merely on sales. There had to be some other party providing financial support. It turned out that my supposition was faulty; the Cemeti Gallery was able to

expand its exhibition space. It means they did more than survive; they could even afford to add facilities. Nindityo and Mella rented the other half of the house so they had a larger exhibition space. Also, they added a new person to the staff. Of course, I didn't know for sure the origins of the funds. I assumed they managed to set aside some money from selling works so they could rent the additional space. Once Nindityo told me a secret, "Yamyuli's prints helped the gallery financially".

Even with the expansion, the exhibition space still felt too small, especially at exhibition openings. Guests would crowd into the two rooms divided by a wall, making it inconvenient to observe the works displayed on all of the walls. It was even worse for installations.

Then Nindityo invited me to join in the establishment of an art foundation. He also approached Agung Kurniawan (an artist), Neni (Agung's fiancée), Koni (an artist), and Anggi Minarni (Director of Karta Pustaka Indonesian-Dutch Cultural Centre). I thought that Nindityo and Mella wanted to convert Cemeti Gallery into a foundation to get more people to handle the voluminous tasks while the funding would be managed by others. I was wrong. What Nindityo and Mella had in mind was a non-profit organisation concerned with contemporary art, particularly documenting contemporary art. The organisation would be institutionally separate from the Gallery. Indeed, no one, not even art education institutions, was documenting art at that time.

Although I was wrong, I agreed to join. We set up the organisation with the full name, *Yayasan Seni Cemeti*



(Cemeti Art Foundation). The reason was simple and practical: the name would favour the socialisation of the Foundation since Cemeti was already widely known. There is, however, the risk of misleading the public to think that Cemeti Art Foundation is part of the Cemeti Gallery, or the other way round. Actually, the two institutions are structurally separate.

As the initiators of the Foundation, Nindityo and Mella willingly provided all documentation they had as the base for the Foundation's collection. Cemeti Art Foundation gradually began conducting its activities as a non-profit organisation and Cemeti Gallery continued as a commercial gallery with its characteristic features. Mella and Nindityo succeeded in developing the market for Cemeti Gallery, comprised, generally speaking, of expatriate buyers. The prices of works started mounting.

All of this represents extraordinary staying power, considering that several such spaces known as alternative galleries – similar to Cemeti Gallery – were able to survive for only one or two years; some survived only months. Cemeti Gallery manages to survive and even to grow, eventually, to be a gallery standing on its own piece of land. It has come to be called Cemeti Art House (*Rumah Seni Cemeti*), a somewhat showy name and, I feel, one that reflects the attempt to distinguish it from art galleries in general.

All of this has had to involve an investment very much bigger than that involved in opening up Cemeti Gallery on Ngadisuryan Street. Cemeti Art House has entered actual business practice, even if the core remains in selling works of contemporary art in

accordance with the visions of Nindityo and Mella. Bank loans were needed to buy the land and build the gallery structure. Consequently, there is now the issue of how to repay the loan. In spite of this, exhibitions of hardly saleable works continue. Indeed, there has been criticism regarding how Cemeti Art House has recently been exhibiting works of contemporary artists who already have their own favourable markets. I myself sometimes feel that Nindityo and Mella are not "as crazy as they used to be", when they were at the rented gallery on Ngadisuryan street. I also sense that they are now beginning to be more conservative in selecting artists that they invite to exhibit in the spacious exhibition hall of Cemeti Art House.

Curiously enough, Nindityo has complained several times about the gallery's capacity to cover the daily operational costs. They assert that they have to rely on the income from selling their own works to cover the management expenses, and lately I learned that Nindityo and Mella have spoken together seriously on the Gallery's future. Should this difficult situation continue, closing the business is only a matter of time.

I remember my point from thirteen years ago: it would be difficult for a gallery like Cemeti, with all its unusual features, to survive on only the sales of its artwork. It desperately needs the support of a business institution with some portion of its profits set aside to fund the gallery's programs, similar to what is currently practised by Kedai Kebun Forum. Alternatively, there could be a non-profit organisation which functioned as an umbrella to the Gallery, an

institution receiving outside funding. Many things can be made more efficient, ranging from staff through to exhibition program expenditures. It is not against the law for a non-profit organisation to raise funds, as long as all of the funds are used to cover the expenses involved in the organisation's/foundation's social programs.

Once this alternative is taken, Nindityo and Mella, instead of being gallery management and owners, will live solely on their careers as professional artists. I will restrain myself from speculating on Mella's and Nindityo's stamina to continue their business. Miracles sometimes happen. Their endurance of fifteen years itself is one.

Raihu Fadjri is a journalist. He lives and works in Yogyakarta.