

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 Yogyakarta 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*





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

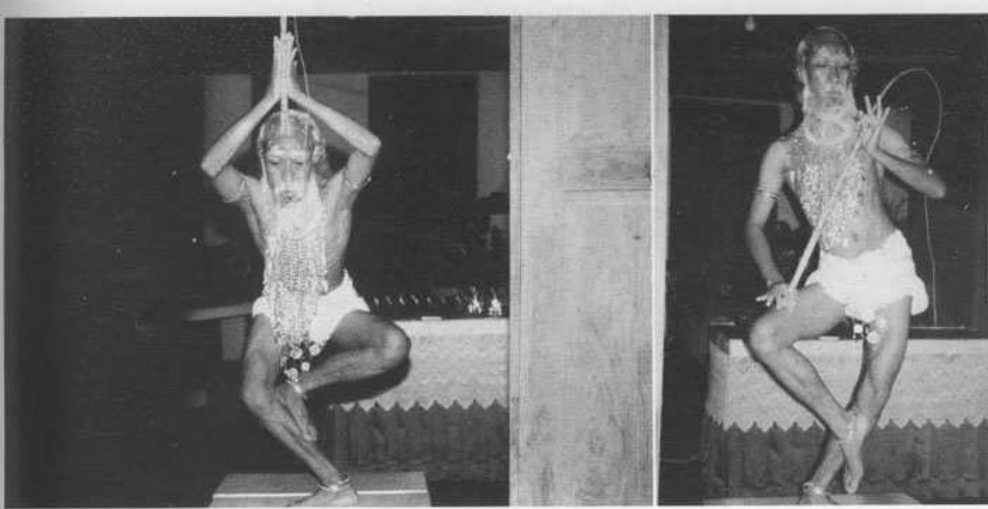
To what part or element of the artist crowd in the gallery were the lashes of Sardono's whip directed? It is pointless to try to find an answer to this question, because the whip was not targeted towards any particular object.

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".

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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)

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

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

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

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

⁵Brian O' Doherty, *ibid.*

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

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

Farah Wardani

A Memento from an Art House:
Panjaitan 41 Yogyakarta, February – April 2002



The Exterior

It isn't so hard to find the place — just look for the strangest-looking building on that street. Every *becak* driver knows that wooden house with the weird blue cubicle. Apart from the big magenta bull's eye logo, the front side speaks for itself: a *pendopo* look-alike edifice with an attached, rigid, concrete compartment painted in light blue on the right side. Did the architect mean it as a metaphor of an encounter between the traditional and the modern, or the East and the West, *joglo* and the Bauhaus? I never had a chance to ask him.

One thing is certain, the aura of the building imposes itself upon its neighbours and everything around it: to the left, a residential house enclosed with a tall fence; to the right, a phone kiosk with a *warung* (food stall) selling fresh fruit cocktails; across the street, a business school. Walk a bit further along the busy road and there are more *warung-warung*, more residences, a *Padang* (West Sumatran) restaurant, a music studio, photocopy shops, and a small supermarket where tea and coffee can be bought, especially for serving on exhibition opening nights.

Exhibitions? Yes. But no, the place is not a gallery, or to be precise, it does not call itself a gallery. In Yogya, there have been too many places bearing that label. Those sorts of places are where you can find paintings to decorate your living room walls, often along with the much-imitated wooden statues of a fisherman and his net or Javanese antiques, whether genuine or fake, or lots of carved furniture and handicraft goodies that make nice "souvenirs from the Third World", as an artist once said.

This place calls itself an Art

House. Now, what is the difference? Rumour has it that this is a place where weird people go and where weird things happen. The place is, indeed, an anomaly, or at least it serves as an interface for anomalies. And for sure, it is in anomalous spaces like this, that the solitary, inscrutable realm called Art finds its own place.

The Interior

Rule number one: the House should be opened at 9am sharp, a good time to start getting things going. February is a no-exhibition month, but that doesn't mean house-sitting is the only job in store. It's business as usual, particularly in the most hectic part of the house, a small room inside the blue cubicle, crowded with office equipment and shelves of file folders, keenly arranged in alphabetical order and even marked with stickers of multi-national flags. The phone rings throughout the day. The postman delivers piles of letters, packages and invitations. Faxes and emails arrive from and are sent to distant corners of the globe. At times it can be a real mess with papers spread out on the desk, stacks of figurines and frames on one corner, or unsorted cards and catalogues scattered on the floor. It's a busy world in there, from 9am to 4am, six days a week.

Outside the office room remains static and peaceful — the scent of wood and terracotta, the small garden with lotus and an old well. It's an almost perfect subdued Javanese atmosphere, warm, organic, and at times mystical. Rumour has it a female ghost sometimes appears in the House. I hope she doesn't actually come out of the well like one did in a Japanese movie.

Perhaps the ghost just wants to

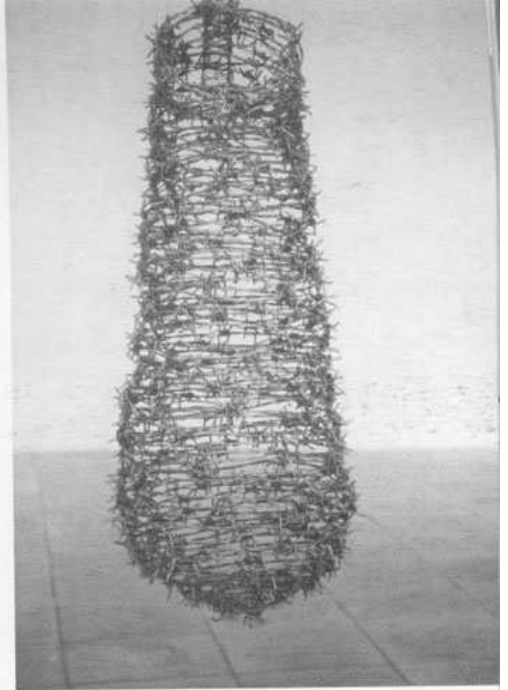
share her dwelling with the other inhabitants of the place: objects that seem to be there without reason, a small stack of bricks tied up and stacked in columns, a big yellow door stabbed with scissors, a metal beehive (well, it does look like a beehive, doesn't it?) hung on the ceiling, and those stone hair buns. Hair buns in the garden. Hair buns in the toilet. A pair of faded pencil drawings on the floor seems to be trying to explain what they are: "A Mere Decoration".

The next rule: Art is never straightforward. Those "decorations" are artefacts that mark past events. Their past meanings transgress along with time as they remain where they are, presenting traces of energy that occasionally flash out. Their presence subtly interrupts the whole atmosphere, their energy remains.

The Main Space

An empty exhibition space is an art work in itself. Perhaps only Daniel Buren would agree with this. However, certain spaces are truly able to say things only with their plain, pure white, big, blank walls. Perhaps it's that energy again, or spirit, in another word. It encompasses a spirit which is perhaps similar to an altar's — the power to give meaning to everything placed within it.

That spirit is what has been keeping this space alive and making it more than just a sterile tightly closed white cubicle where pretty stuff is placed, hung, put on a pedestal and in glass boxes for viewers to see and admire, like butterflies in a bell jar. The space is organic in every sense, not only since it has no air conditioning and the warm humid air of Yogya is inescapable, nor for its open construction which



invites mosquitoes and ants to come in and out easily accompanying visitors. It is itself an organism. It grows along as things and happenings are made, invented and re-invented inside it, with desires of change and the new, creating an interface of challenges, although for sure, not without its consequences.

After hanging out with Art for some time one comes to realise its complications. It's a web of power relations which are at times internally opposing one another. The power of money vs. knowledge vs. recognition vs. authority vs. legitimacy vs. ideology vs. taste vs. whatever, that sometimes makes the art work less important. The House is a place meant for Art to be able to stand on its own away from this commotion. But even so, and as it gains strength with time, rumour is that it still can't make everyone happy. Art is such an insatiable world.

Yet, perhaps, it is also what keeps things going, even if it means having to go around in circles to return to the starting point which asks: What can Art do to make changes? Perhaps the answer no longer matters, as the next circular path is never the same, promising a different round, different moments, different challenges. Yes, perhaps, this is what keeps things going.

Within that space, at midnight, an artist sat on the floor with cans of spray paint, surrounded by silence. The sounds of motorcycles were no longer heard. It was getting late and the artist packed his things away, leaving his unfinished drawing on the wall to be continued the next day. Time was running out as the opening date was getting close. But whatever happens, the show must go on. There will always

be people waiting to come and see, especially on the opening night when they can meet, mingle and celebrate, discuss-gossip-chatter over packs of cigarettes, or just come for free snacks and coffee. It's always been like that and it always will be.

Yes, whatever happens, the show must go on. And on.

**) Thanks to Eko Prawoto, Agung Kurniawan, Gusbarlian, S. Teddy D, Yusra Martunus, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Hanura Hosea, and Eko Nugroho whose works and figures are referred to in this essay.*

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Dr. Oei Hong Djien

Is painting marginalised in the era of contemporary art?

If we look at visual arts events such as biennales and triennials in the world today and over the past few decades, what one notices is the decreasing number of paintings exhibited. Visiting *Documenta X* in Kassel, Germany, in 1997, I was unable to find a single painting. Represented in abundance were installation art, photographic art, digital art and video art, in which the technology tended to be more conspicuous than the art. Some were good, interesting, and enjoyable. But there were others that were difficult to understand or appreciate. Even things that we see everyday in our homes and never take any notice of, were on show here.

Is it that the visual arts public today like and appreciate these kinds of works more than paintings?

People, as a rule, are curious. So, people flock to events like these to have a look. And when they've had a look, sometimes they just laugh and shake their heads in disbelief. It is as if there is a distance between the artists who create the works and the public who view them, even if the public are able to physically interact with, or even play a major role in, the works. Installations have at least three dimensions, in the form of space, and may have sound as the "fourth dimension", and smell as the "fifth dimension". Performance art even has time as a "sixth dimension". Despite this, when they view the works, by and large the public are not moved in the same way that they are moved when they view a painting, which has just two dimensions.

There are others, however, who feel that contemporary works like installations are closer to the viewing

public than paintings are. In physical terms, there will always be distance between paintings and viewers, for instance in a museum touching paintings on the wall is strictly forbidden; just coming too close will earn you a reprimand or set off an alarm. In fact, the problem is not that simple. At an art event, artists want to present new innovations, just as in other fields, such as science and technology. Here, painting has no chance. Painting has been explored exhaustively. It would be nigh on impossible nowadays to stun the world with a new painting. Indonesian artists with an international reputation, such as Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto, F. X. Harsono, and Arahmaiani are famous not for paintings, but for installations or performance art. They were on the ball.

It makes sense to go international with non-conventional works such as installation art or performance art if there is no longer any room for conventional art like paintings and sculpture. It is also very rewarding, because Indonesia is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial country with a diversity of still-intact cultures. If our artists want to find inspiration, the arts and cultures scattered throughout the Indonesian archipelago would provide a never-ending source of material. New horizons would open up, different perhaps from the political issues that Indonesian artists have been grappling with for so long. Our country is far richer in resources than Western countries. To discover something new, Picasso had to turn to African art and culture as a source of inspiration. If we made use of our national riches, we would not be branded as imitating the West.

The progressive Western appetite for

exploration gives them the chance to make discoveries before we do. They can process the things they find and then re-export them. What Indonesian artists need to do is to work hard and have the same kind of appetite to explore Western art.

The proliferation of contemporary art works such as installations and performance art aside, it is difficult for a collector to accommodate these works because of space constraints and the complexities of displaying them. Their display capacity too cannot compare to that of a painting. While an art work is also generally used to create the kind of atmosphere the people living in the house want or to make a space more comfortable, an installation cannot take the place of a painting or sculpture, which can be easily shifted into the bedroom to make it more intimate.

What about photographic art, digital art and video art, which are also interesting and do not take up much space? For warmth and feeling, they cannot compete with a painting. Perhaps because in these works, ratio is more significant than emotion or feeling. Today's computer-minded generation may think differently, however.

From my observations, paintings still attract the most public interest. Even though they are expensive, it is not easy to get tickets for Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso exhibitions, or for exhibitions of other well-known painters in Europe and North America. I once waited more than a month to get a ticket for the René Magritte Centenary exhibition in Brussels, Belgium, to no avail.

The intense public interest in

paintings in countries where people have a high level of appreciation of art, proves that paintings still hold a place, a central place in fact, in the public's heart and have not been marginalised in this era of contemporary visual arts. The notion that there is distance between paintings and the public has never been proven. In fact, for intimacy with the public, non-conventional works will never be able to compete with paintings. For collectors, paintings are still number one, because they are easy to handle: easy to hang, easy to store, easy to move, and easy to transport. It will be interesting to see whether in the future paintings will be able to regain their major role in key visual arts events.

What is the Position of Cemeti Art House?

Cemeti is known for its orientation towards contemporary art. Anything considered not to fall within this domain will not be accommodated by Cemeti Art House. It exhibits more installations than other galleries, which are generally only interested in paintings, and in recent years, sculpture. Cemeti accommodates paintings too, but only those that fit Cemeti frames. There is nothing wrong with that, because specialisation in the field of art is normal. The development and diversity of visual arts make it impossible to be adept in all. It may be that good quality works are not accepted by Cemeti Art House because they do not meet its criteria. The criteria it applies could be an interesting topic of discussion.

All this aside, Cemeti Art House has been successful in carrying out its mission over the past 15 years. It serves to introduce and disseminate

contemporary visual arts in Indonesia, particularly in Yogyakarta. Cemeti has shown enormous dedication in its field and has succeeded in bringing young Indonesian artists into the arena of international arts events. Hopefully, more galleries of the calibre of Cemeti will grow. Not necessarily with the same outlook as Cemeti, in fact the more variety the better, because this will enrich the wealth of Indonesian visual art.

Happy anniversary, Cemeti.

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