

Agung Kurniawan

Quo vadis Cemeti Art House?

one

This tale is a review of personal experiences in relation to the growth of alternative spaces. Being a tale it may, of course, be fictional and far-fetched.

two

That evening we were starving. Our hunger intensified with the barking of our dogs who, it turns out, were sharing our hunger. Neni had a cold so, I had to hurry out to get the meal for the night. We had decided to eat *sate*. To get to the *sate* seller I had to pass Sri Wedani Street, right behind the old Shopping Centre.

This street should not have become a marketplace (in the 1980s there used to be an active traditional market, then the authorities closed it down and moved it to another location on the outskirts of the city), but for whatever reasons vendors still offered their various commodities there, ranging from vegetables, soybean curd products (*tahu* and *tempe*), through to preserved fish. It was drizzling, so you can imagine how muddy it was. Garbage, horse dung, saliva, plastic litter, meatball soup, and perhaps male and female vendors' urine, in short, all the kinds of filth familiar to traditional bazaars, were conspicuous there.

Immediately behind the bazaar, in glorious splendour, stood a building of the old colonial style. Its whiteness was so striking in the background of the bazaar which was filled with hazy neon lights. The building was the new facility of the Yogyakarta Arts Centre (*Taman Budaya Yogyakarta*). The facility, built on a budget of some nine billion rupiah, to provide an exhibition hall and a theatre (on the second floor) of international standards, was ready to

accommodate an audience of, more or less, one thousand and four hundred.

Built for international standard exhibitions and performances, the provincial government felt the need to have a space that represented the image of a city considered to be highly cultured. But look at it now: the exhibition hall is practically empty and, more pitifully, the roof leaks, not to mention the poor condition of the restrooms (indeed, the very representation of how cultured a city really is). The relatively new building looked neglected. How could such a place be so barren? Don't artists need such a magnificent facility?

When building this splendid structure, the designers forgot one thing, namely its creative support. When this massive old Dutch building was being renovated, alternative spaces offering smaller and more intimate exhibition venues were beginning to open in Yogyakarta. Rented rooms, living rooms, space behind a restaurant-kitchen, or even sidewalks served as exhibition venues. It was the time when "trans-functional space" began to be recognised as part of the rebellion against the centralised spatial system. Artists in Yogyakarta no longer feel the need for spectacular and luxurious arenas; instead, they prefer intimate venues.

Taman Budaya was built on the premise that the works exhibited there would represent the best of regional art, so that the venue had to anticipate a large audience or at least be accessible to as many people and sectors of society as possible. It is developed based on a top-down model, a miniature of the government policy realised in art, where art can only be something great, grand, characterising

"national culture". Since the exhibition space has opened, only a handful of artists have used it. The facility is too big (requiring a high rent). Moreover, there is, perhaps, a certain reluctance among artists who regard the Taman Budaya Art Centre as belonging to a centralised system of a corrupt regime which has already collapsed, that would stigmatise any art exhibition held there. To make it worse, it is located behind a filthy, muddy, vegetable marketplace. Surely, our dandy, genteel artists cannot allow horse waste to stain their precious trousers!

three

The year 1991, in the dry season, at number 7a Ngadisuryan Street. I dared myself to enter a space that looked like the living room of a residence. Its walls were crowded with numerous "paintings". They practically consumed the entire wall space. A lean and tall man was typing intensely in a corner. From the way he was typing, I soon knew he was not trained in it. My attention then turned to a "painting" hung on the walls – later I learned that the work was a serigraph – and I was amazed. The work really compelled me to observe its details. It represented the texture of a rock and on it were scratched figures similar to those in cave wall paintings. Later, I learned the artist's name: Dwi Marianto. He was, virtually, the first person to encourage my intention to enrol in the Painting Department of the Indonesian Institute for the Arts (ISI) in Yogyakarta. (I was then undecided whether I would choose the painting or printmaking department.) Dwi Marianto's serigraphic work convinced me to take the printmaking option. A spontaneous,



8 AUGUST - 30 SEPTEMBER 1996

C E M E T I

MODERN ART GALLERY
JALAN NGADISURIAN 7A (near the castle) TOGA
open 9.00-13.30
monday closed

midday visit effectively turned me into an addict, compelled to see the subsequent exhibition at this gallery. The place I am talking about is Cemeti Gallery; that was, perhaps, then the only venue showing unpopular forms of art. I remember Heri Dono's first exhibition featuring three-dimensional works, the etchings of Bambang Setiawan (where is he now?), the very interesting drawings of Sutrisno, and Iwan Koeswanna's telephone painting that, I think, is superb.

Despite all of its activities, the gallery was nothing more than an extended living room, without any trace of the "sacred aura" of an art gallery. The awe of such a "sacred aura" remained hidden somewhere in the living-room quadrangle, the patterned flooring, the cheap whitewash, and the clatter of the white "Brother" manual typewriter. Yet this cosy place was short lived. Noticing the many "strange things" happening there, people soon coined a name, and a "cultural enclave", or an alternative gallery, was born. Suddenly, the place became sacred and invaluable. The small living room characteristic of a typical national housing project residence has now turned into a holy shrine filled with sacred golden cows. And I am trapped in it for who knows how long; what hell!

four

An alternative space turns out to be an organism. It is not static; it knows growth and, inevitably, its own death. We learn about it from the two examples presented above. *Taman Budaya*, that was once highly revered, has gradually aged and is withering. Even plastic surgery, costing nine billion rupiah, could not hide its mortality and

eventual expiration. Instead of becoming beautiful, it has turned into a zombie. As for the Cemeti Gallery, having passed through plastic surgery that converted it into the Cemeti Art House, it survives, although it had to depend on artificial respiration several times. It survives today, largely because it remains true to its original concept, which is contemporary art supported by its community. Cemeti Art House will survive as long as its supporting community is there. Its community is comprised of various elements: loyal collectors, artists willing to show their works there, guests who never tire of attending exhibition openings, and, most importantly, the continuous supply of young artists from the artist "factories" in Yogyakarta and Bandung. The latter are absent in the case of Taman Budaya Art Centre. Its supporting community crumbled like a house of cards. Lecturers of Art who always represented the official artists of the New Order, are decaying in their lecturer offices. These civil-servant artists have fallen one by one in the face of a storm of vigorous young artists. Without any internal reform of government art institutions, the Taman Budaya Art Centre will soon come to its end, since it lives only on the mutually parasitic relationship between the state and its art institutions.

Learning from what has happened to the Taman Budaya Art Centre, the Cemeti Art House needs to expand its community in order to survive. The issue of expanding its art community or of involving the public in art activities has indeed been the topic of endless discussions. Artists adopt many methods to make their art democratically accessible to the people.

Some artists, for example, have brought their work out of the gallery. For certain kinds of art, this works fine in terms of public acceptance, yet the story is different with works that are contrary to the "taste of the majority" (and I define "the taste of the majority" as works that are decent, not pornographic, artistic, and – of course – do not probe into the sensitive issues of social class, race, ethnicity, and religion). This kind of art will certainly be subject to censorship by the public, as well as the artists themselves.

Bringing works out from galleries is not the only option in expanding the Cemeti Art House's art community. In my opinion, expanding the Cemeti Art House community can take place periodically by bringing a new segment of the community into the gallery. (Bringing the public into the art gallery is important for the Cemeti Art House since the foundation of their movement is, actually, "interior", that is, its projects are based-in-building activities. The public brought into the gallery is a somewhat select one based on artistic, not economic interests. This is indeed a bit of a dilemma, because it is something of a paradox: attempting to enlarge the art community, yet at the same time being selective. I think, however, this option is reasonable, considering that Cemeti Art House's art community is not "the masses who must be educated about good and proper art". Rather, it is a group of people already quite informed about art, but who still require an alternative form of art that is willing to explore more critical, more subversive areas (that they themselves wish to explore, but, because of various obstacles, are hampered from doing so themselves) and are not just



accommodating the issues of everyday politics as reported in the newspapers.

So, suppose that Cemeti Art House transformed itself from a gallery to a kind of laboratory or, say, an experimental space. This shift in ideological perspective regarding space and its relationship with creating a new art audience may, I believe, prolong the life of this Art House for some time before its eventual demise, when the elegant structure itself will become a restaurant or a garage housing exclusive cars. Then a “new” form will fill the space it left behind.

How lovely this romantic art world of ours is!

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Popok Tri Wahyudi

Cemeti, Apotik Komik And Me

My involvement in an exhibition at Cemeti Art House (CAH) was truly beyond my expectations. In fact, many of my friends had suggested that I submit a proposal for an exhibition there, but at that time (it was still the Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery), it seemed closed and very exclusive. Only a select group of people could exhibit there. Confusion reigned because information was very scarce. It was not clear who was the curator and who was the owner. A situation like that can be manipulated by a third party to spread information which will create a bias amongst listeners. Many cliques emerged regarding the existence of CAH — there were those who supported it, there were also those who opposed it.

I was apathetic and didn't care; just let CAH have its own paradise. What's more, at that time, the art scene was still dominated by senior artists (just look at the Biennale Yogyakarta exhibition), which was just an arena rotated amongst the famous with their same old works), and there were no opportunities for many young artists to step forward. Exhibition space that provided young artists to show their works was very rare. All of this challenged us to explore alternative media to voice our expressions. Why should we bow our heads and follow their rules? Art is not an exact science that must stop at a given point. It must move dynamically and actively. An exhibition space should not be dominated by only inner spaces; there are many places outside which can become exhibition spaces, even though they are as small as a bathroom.

In 1997, I was involved in a wall comic project in Nitiprayan, Patangpuluhan, Yogyakarta. Actually,

for me, this project was a playful, refreshing project to escape from the routine of my own work (at that time I was still working at a T-shirt factory in Yogya). Then, as the project developed, it was packaged as an art exhibition with considerable publications which stimulated response from the media. At that time, I was not too involved because I was very busy with work. In the end, we named the project location *Apotik Komik* (Comic Pharmacy). As I remember, this name was chosen because of the desire to have an address which we didn't have then and also to compliment the facilities in that area, since one of the neighbours had already opened an art clinic.

Perhaps the publicity on the wall comics shook up the Yogya art world — perhaps because of the place chosen for the exhibition or perhaps because of the participation of the artists, most of whom were young and not yet recognised in the broader art world; perhaps also because of the chosen name, *Apotik Komik*, which eventually became a media for collaboration for artists involved in their projects. Indeed, the name arose out of our fondness and concern for comics which are still shunned by our art world. Also, each of the artists involved in *Apotik Komik* had worked intensely on producing comics, even though it was limited only to a campus environment. We had compiled several editions of *Core Comic*. In view of this, it could be said that comics were not something new for the friends of *Apotik Komik*.

In the beginning, *Apotik Komik* was unlike other organisations in general: We did not have a president, but rather just a president for each

project which we undertook. Each artist involved had the right to express a different opinion. This produced a profile of the group which was very fluid and difficult to predict. Like a latrine — we hated it, but at times we needed it. So it was for the group. The output we produced was like manure swept aside and wrapped in our own special way. This became, for me, a heaven for playing and socialising without any cares. It became a place for refreshing and a media to produce collaborative works without losing the characteristics of each of the involved artists.

I hope that *Apotik Komik* will open its doors as widely as possible and become an alternative place for our young artist friends. Also, I hope that it doesn't repeat the practices of other art spaces, which are limited to senior artists and those who are already famous. It can be said that this attempt is an answer to the difficulty of ploughing through the bureaucracy of exhibitions. Even without CAH, we can express our own art. If CAH was compared to an elephant, then *Apotik Komik* could evolve into an elephant as well and prepare for battle; if indeed it was necessary.

However, that is just a dream; different from reality. After the exhibition of the wall comics, I was offered the opportunity for a solo exhibition at CAH. This seemed to challenge my own convictions. I was facing a dilemma. This hole existed not because of me, but because of my own friends at *Apotik Komik*. So, this belief that I had held for all this time, was not as strong as I had imagined. Although the final decision lay in my own hands, I regretted that this could have happened. It seemed that this situation





put me in a position that was very grey. The conflict continued. I was like a mouse-deer between two fighting elephants. An unfortunate position. On one side, it was me as an individual; while on the other, it was me as a member of *Apotik Komik*. This became my dilemma; a tendency for weakness in making decisions in *Apotik Komik*'s internal matters.

There are times we exhibit for the interests of the group and there also are times we create for our own interests. To establish a balance, we must be clever in determining when and for whom we create. Creating for ourselves is, of course, easier than when we create in the interests of many; we do not need to consider other people's interests because this creative effort is our own. It is different when creating for a group interest or for many people. Our ego will automatically yield to the group's interests.

The existence of a group in our society at this time still plays a major role. Our traditions teach us that *gotong royong* (community cooperation) is the best method for solving our problems. If we are united, who would dare to oppose us? However, if that group interest was overcome by a personal interest that was dominant in the group, then the communal interest would be disturbed. Event more so if the role of this group in the society had a major influence.

We as a nation do not have a successful portrait of a group that can be idolised. It can be said that every newly formed group is an imitation of a preceding group. They duplicate the movements, but not the spirit. They don't concentrate on the common interest, but only on personal interests

which are then assisted by the rest of the group. It makes sense when, in the end, they end up the same. They create not for the collective interest, but for individual interests collectively.

Then, if it is for the interests of a specific group with another group, there are many things that can be done to invite co-operation between the groups, depending on how each group communicates. We are often faced with the point of co-operation. We return to the question: How important is the group interest? If it is only the interests of one's own group that is held in mind, then the co-operation between the two groups will not be successful.

This became a major question for me: is CAH interested in exhibiting my work because of me as an individual or because I am involved with *Apotik Komik*? It is perfectly natural if CAH has a certain strategy in selecting artists to exhibit their works in their exhibition space. Perhaps this is the important key to the endurance of CAH's exhibitions. If this is indeed true, perhaps it validates the widespread opinion that CAH's survival amongst the other art spaces, all of which are very recent, is miraculous. Event more so, because the field of visual arts is very dry, very distant from anything sparkling, in comparison to the other arts.

All of this makes sense in light of the information and illustrations I had at the beginning, before I exhibited at CAH, although that was still in the adolescent years before it became CAH. The method they use now is more open and fair. I am also aware of their difficulty in finding young artists who are aligned with their curatorial corridor. Because CAH exists in an

unique field, the strategies that they employ must also be unique. Sometimes, they even need special effects with a bit of a surprise.

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Mikke Susanto S.Sn.

The Frame and Hidden History



In mid-1993, my name appeared on the list of students accepted into the Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI) Yogyakarta, published in an edition of *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, which was sent by my friend, Hadi Soesanto, to Jember, where I was then living. That year was my first time in Yogyakarta as a student. Like all the other freshmen, I was going to be studying on a campus that had produced great artists, lesser artists, and, so rumour had it, artists who were stressed out and crazy, and even some who had committed suicide. And it was from the talk on campus that I got to know Cemeti. A new name to me, an "incentive" and "gallery", all rolled into one.

At that time, Cemeti was still on Jalan Ngadisuryan, in the Kraton area, close to the bathing pools of the queens of Yogyakarta, known as Taman Sari. Measuring only about 12 metres by 14 metres, the house that functioned as a gallery was very small in comparison to other galleries in Java. A wall divided the space into two parts. There were four rooms in the back: a data room and stock room (both about 3 metres by 3 metres), a toilet and a tiny kitchen. So, the exhibition space was, at most, around 4 metres by 14 metres. The remaining space was a passageway. The front room? Yes, that's the gallery.

But the front yard seemed wider. Wider, but not spacious. The yard was painted, but the paint was cracking here and there. In the middle, there was a knee-high brick wall, on top of which was a big sign with a yellow circle on it – the gallery's logo. There was also a tall avocado tree, taller than the house, whose leaves often littered

the roof and the yard. The east corner of the yard was used as a dumping ground for cardboard boxes and the packing from paintings. In the middle of the wall, there was the Cemeti logo, which looked like the symbol for an echo (not the red circle with a dot in the middle, which is Cemeti's logo now), and on the west wall, there was a small information board with posters all over it.

That's not all. There was no parking space for cars and bikes. At every exhibition opening, there were cars parked all over the road, often causing traffic jams. Bikes were just parked in someone else's yard across the road. That's why the "Fongers" bike I sometimes used got broken and scratched, scraped up against other people's bikes. Whenever there was an exhibition opening, there were fragments of broken glasses and plates underfoot. There was nowhere comfortable to sit; everyone was expected to relax and enjoy themselves standing up.

Perhaps that's why it always seemed so crowded? No matter who was exhibiting, the gallery was always packed. So many different kinds of people gathered there: from locals to non-locals; from "snackers" (people who were there for the food) to catalogue hunters; from kids from the arts high schools to artists, curators, scholars, and international art observers; from those who could speak only Javanese to those who were fluent in foreign languages. Not there, of course, were those who perhaps disliked, even hated, Cemeti (and also, perhaps, Mella and Nindit); whether students or artists whose works had been rejected for exhibition, art lecturers who objected to the so-called "contemporaneity" of Cemeti, people or activists opposed to

donations from the West (read: the Netherlands, because there were some who thought that Cemeti was a non-governmental organisation funded by foreign money), people who judged that Cemeti exercised hegemony in Indonesian visual arts, or those who simply did not like, had no time for, or did not know anything about art. It may be that some people still feel like this.

Perhaps it seemed crowded because the place was so small; or it may have been because the artist was well known, or the food was good, or whatever. But however crowded it seemed, there were always fewer people there than had been invited. Nindit once told me that out of around 600 invitations sent out by the gallery, only around 10% - 30% of those invited actually turned up, and that included those who came at times other than the opening nights. Looking back at the time when the gallery was at Ngadisuryan, it really was a sweaty and "bloody" battle. Before they had a telephone and enough money, Mella, Nindit and their friends had to print invitations and posters for exhibitions themselves. They had none of the sophisticated technology to communicate rapidly with artists or institutions abroad, just the regular postal service. The buyers? Apparently, expatriate friends and tourists visiting Taman Sari who dropped by Cemeti afterwards.

But the main attraction of that gallery was its unusual offerings. Most observers said that Cemeti had a special something, a different groove, the hottest works from Indonesia and from countries in the forefront of the visual arts, that it was "out on the edge", not money-oriented, and that it was the most contemporary of all galleries.





M. Dwi Marianto

A Cultural Bridge for Cemeti Art House

Cemeti Art House (CAH), formerly Cemeti Art Gallery, is one of several privately owned art institutions in Indonesia; and, having a good management system, it is the best organised. Its planned, scheduled and regularly publicised programmes reach many segments of the art loving community, not only in the local community in Yogyakarta, but also in the national and international communities, via the Internet. CAH activities are discussed, talked about in discussion forums or in conjunction with discussions on the radio of programmes managed by Cemeti Art Foundation (CAH's sister organisation). That is not all. Its events are also well documented, stored in graphic, written and digital media. In general, the activities of state higher education institutes of art, and private institutions involved in the fields of social studies, art and the art world are not as well organised or well documented. Nor are these organisations as productive, because they have yet to develop a work culture that emphasises efficiency, consistency, modern communication, and making the most of their work and relations by networking with the broader community.

Fifteen years old this year, Cemeti has become big, I feel, thanks to its management. The quality of art exhibitions, discussions, art lessons and art media publications is relative. Others do the same things. But from my empirical observations, in general, art works or art issues – whatever form they take – will be more interesting and will be discussed more articulately and heard about, if they are packaged and presented properly, in the sense of being delivered in a supportive context. Good packaging and presentation requires

multidisciplinary planning, administration and organisation. So, in the limited space I have available here, I will not talk about art, but rather, I wish to emphasise several points related to the management of CAH, which I feel can serve as a guideline, option, or model for the system of management of art institutions.

CAH has been a success in terms of its progress, performance and existence because it has been able to design and implement facilitative systems, including:

- 1) Systems that are able to systematically and consistently support, educate and create a community that knows, understands, and ultimately needs contemporary art to fulfil individual and collective needs;
- 2) Organised systems for disseminating information about current and planned activities through various methods and mediums, both conventional and electronic;
- 3) Systems that allow CAH to maintain and make use of its communication and relations with the community and with institutions that care about, and have strategic resources to allocate to, its art and cultural activities and its publications; and,
- 4) Work systems that maintain the image, individuality, and character of CAH.

For an institution, especially an art gallery or art house like CAH, the community is essential; it is a strategic key component. To illustrate – you cannot have an exhibition without visitors, a performance without spectators, a play without an audience. Who would want to go there? Who would want to buy a ticket, supposing they were for sale? No one would want

to write about the event in the mass media. CAH began developing its community when it was still based at Jl. Ngadisuryan 7, Yogyakarta. The place was not large – just a rented house with no parking area. Yet, CAH was able to attract people from various communities: art students, artists, researchers from Indonesia and overseas, expatriates, tourists and art lovers. That community has been maintained, expanded even in terms of numbers and scope, so that today it extends not only to local areas of Yogyakarta and cities in Indonesia, but also, via the Internet, to the global community.

Leaflets about CAH activities are regularly distributed via post to people who are a part of its community. The format of its publications is consistent, detailed and clear. More detailed and complete information is distributed to a mailing list via the Internet, or publicised via brochures and posters. These are common and accepted methods of publicising information. But well-planned publication of events well in advance is not the norm among art institutions. CAH has a publication culture which other institutions that want to engage the community need to adopt.

Community participation in CAH has been expanded to include the broader community, both in Indonesia and overseas. CAH has also successfully lobbied non-governmental organisations in Indonesia and abroad to fund CAH programmes, including exhibitions in its own exhibition space and in other locations both in Indonesia and overseas, such as the *Awat!* exhibition of contemporary art works, which toured countries in three continents.



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M. Dwi Marianto

All this would have been difficult to achieve, had CAH not had the ability to forge cooperation through lobbying and proposals with various governmental and non-governmental organisations

CAH has always been flexible about the kinds of works it presents. Works in the contemporary vein that combine popular culture and modern approaches from various countries, in the sense of not being confined by convention as to what constitutes modern. Here, there is a marriage or interaction of cultures from various countries: the Netherlands, Japan, Australia, Eastern Europe, India, Indonesia and the United States. People associate the name CAH with a place in which there is a mixing of cultures that often crosses local cultural norms.

This said, nothing is perfect. Having a sophisticated management does not guarantee that an organisation will operate efficiently and smoothly all the time. Whether a system and style of an individual or organisation is good or conspicuous, depends largely on its relations with other systems around it. The challenge facing CAH is an existential problem. CAH is a high-flyer, its acceleration in productivity is in sharp contrast to the productivity and culture of other local institutions, in Yogyakarta, let's say. If delivery, style and culture contrast too sharply with that of the local environment, this generally indicates a complex existential problem. As an example, the local community becomes disturbed and defensive in response to this sharp contrast. This is analogous to a traditional community with a collective culture, in the midst of which lives a family whose culture is very different, and has guests whose culture is also very different, to

that of the local people.

CAH, in my opinion, is an organisation with a good management system from which lessons can be learnt. CAH has succeeded in forming a continually expanding modern community that adopts contemporary cultures, and which has a high degree of authority at both symbolic and cultural levels. By adopting sophisticated systems and facilities, CAH has inadvertently assumed control of some strategic points of artistic and cultural life that in the past were controlled by local people and organisations. This contradiction in culture and lifestyle could be turned into an unpleasant time bomb.

Right from the start, CAH was able to form a contemporary art community. What it needs to do now, I feel, is build a cultural bridge that engages local communities and stakeholders and fosters among them a sense of ownership of CAH. Without the involvement and participation of the local community, success will be missing something.

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