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CEMETI ART HOUSE in the Indonesian Artworld

It would be hard to deny that Cemeti Art House (CAH) holds a central position in the Indonesian art world, not only in Yogyakarta, where it is located, but also in other major cities in Java and Bali. Starting out in a small, rented exhibition space, CAH is now the owner of a fabulous, large exhibition space, signifying the established position CAH has achieved. So, there is no doubt that CAH is now a representative of mainstream visual art practices in Indonesia. That CAH has reached the age of fifteen years is also a mark of the consistency, dedication and commitment of its managers and owners, Nindityo and Mella Jaarsma.

CAH actually earned its substantial reputation in its early years. It maintains this reputation today, notwithstanding changes in contemporary visual arts and changes in the social and political situation, which to a greater or lesser degree have dampened the spirit of CAH. It may be that the energy and appeal of CAH has declined because it is so well-organised (CAH programmes are carefully arranged, some even six months beforehand), but equally, it may be a consequence of the increasing competition resulting from the growth in contemporary visual art institutions sparked by the "success" of CAH. There are now a number of "alternative" spaces that have more or less the same vision and orientation as CAH. Also, one should not forget, there is now little or no resistance to CAH.

The presence of CAH is significant because, through its activities, it is able to provide the sophistication the contemporary art world in Indonesian needs. This need

was not anticipated by formal institutions, either government or private; the commercial galleries, which at that time were generally seen as a derivative of that twist in visual art history: Modernism. Before CAH existed, organisation of visual art exhibitions or activities generally referred to the framework of modern visual art, in the taken for granted belief in the art "value", that modern society needed modern art. Inevitably, there was criticism of this graceless and stagnant modern art, notably the art rebellion launched by Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (the New Art Movement), among others. But CAH did not come into being from a desire to rebel, but from a desire to find alternative models of mediation with contemporary visual arts in Indonesia.

Contemporary Visual Art and Art Institutes

There is a paradox in contemporary visual art, in which an obsession with issues and dynamics of contemporary culture have made art works more difficult to accept and understand. Here, the art world is significant because their context as works of art is justified within the domain of the art world. Modern visual art is able to propagate art concepts in the public sphere through the hegemonic construct of the history of modern visual art. Also, modern visual art forms an art doctrine that has spawned works with visual properties that justify their existence as art. Another paradox – although contemporary visual art frequently manifests itself as activities in which there is direct interaction with the public or which take place in public spaces, this in fact makes it more

difficult for the public to accept it as art. The public has become accustomed to accepting the expressively personal character of works of modern art.

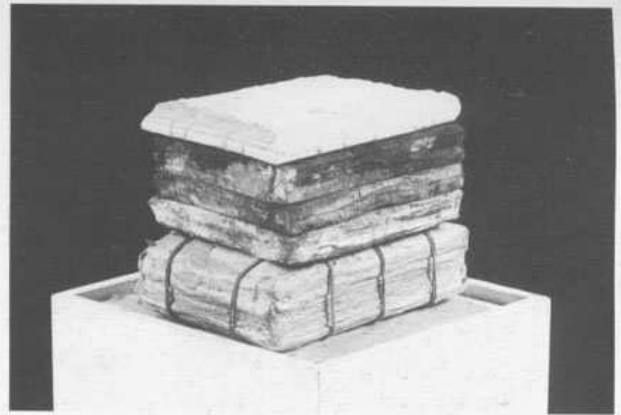
Art has become more complex with the utilization of various alternatives appropriated and recycled from diverse sources, which connect directly with the public at large. Contemporary art has become even more complex too, because its connection and discourse relate to modern theories of culture. But contemporary visual art is also more stimulating for artists, their art public, and their sponsors, because it opens up so many more alternatives that before would not have been possible in art. The reality is that contemporary art is very conducive. There are more artists and more spaces available for the practice of contemporary visual arts.

So, the advent of CAH at the end of the 90s led the way in regard to meeting the need for institutions that could accommodate and justify contemporary art, in all its manifestations. Of course, it was not only CAH that supported contemporary art practices at that time, but it was CAH that institutionalised the production and consumption of contemporary visual arts through its agency. As an institution, CAH has proven itself first and foremost in its role as a key point in the international contemporary visual art circuit and in stimulating the growth of contemporary visual art discourse in Indonesia.

Cemeti Art House as an Agent of Contemporary Visual Art

Cemeti Art House is an example of the model of agency in contemporary visual art referred to by George Dickie in his





Institutional Theory of Art. This theory is primarily related to the difficulty, according to Dickie, of defining something as a work of art simply from the character or appearance of the object itself. Dickie's theory also has some bearing on discourse and practices in contemporary visual art that avoid or reject the question, what is art? Contemporary visual art is influenced by what is called linguistic turn in modern theoretical discourse, with its emphasis on seeking the textual meaning behind art works. But as to which should be chosen for interpretation and attention, there are no longer any "rules" or standards, perhaps only "trends". In this context, the existence of a visual arts "agent" is crucial and central.

Institutional theory rejects the defining of art based on aesthetic theory. Aesthetic theory maintains that something is said to have artistic meaning or is categorised as art because it provides a route for and generates aesthetic experience and perceptions, either for the artist or for viewers. In this context, institutional theory is in keeping with the anti-aesthetic concept of art, such as that expounded by Duchamp. Institutional theory also provides an explanation of why an object or "event" is categorised as art, even though in appearance it is far from the "conventions" formulated by the aesthetic concept that forms the basis of formalism in modern visual art in the West in the 20th century. Works that in appearance and concept are not known in avant-gardism and the tendency in contemporary visual art towards "anything goes", have to a greater or lesser degree been legitimised by the institutional theory of art.

Nevertheless, there is a good deal of opposition to the institutional theory of art. Many feel that Dickie's theory is too simplistic to be called an art theory. Despite this, many feel that the institutional theory explains the patterns of mediation and the justification of art in the processes of the production and consumption of contemporary visual art.

Yet, contemporary visual art is not sustained by theory and definitions of art. Critics and curators nowadays are more concerned with reading the text behind artworks, regardless of form and appearance of what is called art work. Because the one that chooses the candidates of art are the agents of art – be it curator, gallery owner, manager of an alternative space – so art theory is no longer important, even more so theories and definitions of art that derive from modernism. The facts show that contemporary art practices disregard and circumvent the principles and theory of modern art. In the West, this was apparent in the rebellion against large museums that had become shrines of modernism. The alternative spaces that began to spring up in the West in the 1970s were a form of resistance against the hegemony of museums. To maintain their position of importance, these large museums were forced to make themselves alternative, as Hans Belting explains:

"When there is no longer any consensus in art, any kind of art can demand to be seen in a museum. If a museum cannot incorporate all the demanded criteria, it can help itself by holding changing exhibitions. In this manner, all irreconciled expectations can be met by allowing a maximum number of diverse ideas to be expressed

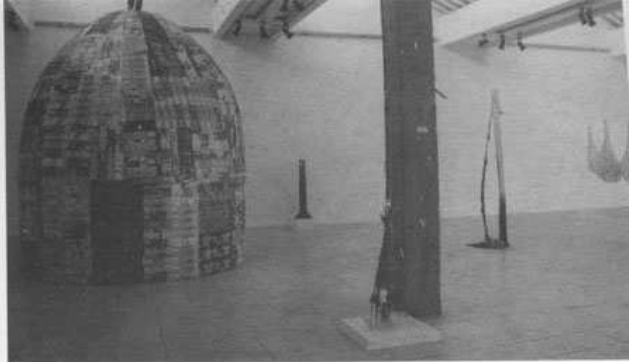
one after the other."¹

What was the condition of the Yogyakarta art world at that time? It goes without saying that both were absent; museums that had adjusted to the demands of contemporary visual art, and alternative spaces that rebelled against the modernist museums that had become the shrines of modernism. At that time, there were only commercial galleries, which existed to serve the demands of buyers during the era of the boom in painting. Thus, the dichotomic partner of CAH at that time was the commercial gallery. That is the reason CAH is often referred to as the origin of alternative galleries in Indonesia. What is clear is that CAH played a role that in developed countries was played by museums and alternative spaces.

Of course, before CAH, institutions had long played the role of agencies of art. But it can be said – sporadic, fragmented trends aside – that in general, the principle adopted was that of the art concept based on aesthetic theory, with its emphasis on the aura of the creator. The tendency was to emphasise the importance of originality, authority and the aura of the artist. Here, definition of art was taken for granted, and was based on principles (Western modern visual art) formulated by art academies and transferred to the sphere of mediation, which was largely supported by capital, by commercial galleries. That many works produced, for example in Yogyakarta, also presented traditional and social themes, was for no reason other than that they were simply a medium or vehicle for creation inspired by a desire to produce an aesthetic construct. In this case, the

Anusapati

An alternative gallery for alternative works



My first encounter with Cemeti Gallery was in 1992, about one and a half years after my return from studying in the United States. At that time I was concerned with finding a base and orientation for my work. What people say is, perhaps, true — that “culture shock” occurs not when one finds one’s self in a foreign setting but, instead, upon returning to one’s own culture after living abroad for some time. Apparently, this was also happening to me, although I had been away for just two years.

One day Mella and Ambar, one of the Cemeti Gallery’s personnel, came by bicycle to my place in Baciro neighbourhood to see some slides of my work. It seemed that Mella was interested in a work of mine being shown then as part of the “Indonesian Sculpture Exhibition 1992” at Purna Budaya, and she offered to exhibit my work at her gallery. The offer was somewhat surprising for me, realising that my works were “unusual” and, even for myself, “experimental” in some ways. My work, “The Journey #2”, which the jury rendered as “unclear”, had almost failed to pass the selection for the exhibition. So it happened that my first solo exhibition was at the Cemeti Gallery, soon to be followed by exhibitions elsewhere.

Cemeti Gallery, with Mella and Nindityo, reminded me of several alternative galleries in New York. It was then a flourishing time for alternative galleries managed by artists. The terms “artist-run galleries” and “co-op galleries” (co-operative galleries) were introduced to signify “non-commercial” galleries mushrooming in the SoHo area in downtown Manhattan, hence the nickname “downtown

galleries”, to distinguish them from established, commercial galleries showing the works of famous artists. The latter were referred to as “uptown galleries”, since they were located primarily in more exclusive uptown areas. (I heard, however, that such geographical zoning has changed considerably now.)

This phenomena of alternative galleries first emerged in the United States (New York, especially) in the 1950s, when there was an art boom. Young, novice artists felt the need for space to show their works without having to wait for existing galleries to “boost” them up. Moreover, the increasingly commercial character of galleries made them see the need to develop their own corridors. They began to explore alternative spaces in downtown areas where the rent was more affordable.

Naturally, the surroundings of these *downtown galleries* were livelier. They occupied primarily old buildings in warehouse areas on narrow streets. Sometimes the gallery was in the basement of an apartment building or perhaps in a modified studio. Cover the windows, paint the walls white, install lighting, and you have an exhibition space. It is easy to imagine that it is in places like this that we may encounter interesting exhibitions which are full of surprise. Actually, such galleries are the birthplaces of famous artists like Elaine de Kooning, George Segal, Mark Di Suvero, and many others.

An “artist-run gallery” is managed by one or several artists, while a “co-op gallery” is run by several artists who are the members of a particular group. The usual practice is to hire someone to handle the day-to-

day management, while the policy remains in the hands of the membership. This is why the interests, as well as the vibes of the artist or group running it strongly colour a gallery like this. There are galleries that specialise in a certain types of work, for instance, the Bowery has interest in figurative works, while SoHo 20 and A.I.R are galleries for woman artists promoting feminism. In addition to showing the works of its own members, some of the galleries are also open for outsiders who must pay for using the space. This is just one of the ways to raise funds. Certain foundations also provide these galleries with some funding, but more often than not, they will avoid financial aid that usually carries an implication of limiting their range of activities.

Since 1974, there has been an organisation called the *Association of Artist-Run Galleries* (AARG) aiming at, through education, encouraging co-operation amongst artists and the art world in general, in addition to making art more accessible to the people. When I was there, most co-op galleries in the States were members of this organisation. By being a member, which involved regular subscriptions, individual galleries received many benefits, such as access to information by means of a newsletter, discounts in advertising in prominent art magazines, media and collector mailing lists, and other facilities.

The fact that Cemeti Gallery had offered to exhibit my work indicated to me that it had positioned itself as an alternative gallery. It was implausible that any mainstream gallery would allow itself to exhibit works, which were more experimental than not, of an



unknown artist, works not easily enjoyable, not to mention saleable, to most people. Cemeti Gallery was, of course, aware of the consequences. As an alternative gallery, Cemeti seemed to seek out only works it considered interesting, even if they came from newcomers — non-commercial works, yet presumably revitalising in spirit, alternative works. It must be acknowledged that Cemeti Gallery has created an extraordinary dynamic in the development of art in Indonesia.

This is a story of more than ten years ago. Today, the Gallery that now bears the name Cemeti Art House is one of the main art galleries in Indonesia, especially for contemporary works. It has become an established institution with a global network, a reference source for anyone wanting information on Indonesian contemporary art. Domestically, it has become the orientation of many young artists and is considered the barometer for their achievements. In other words, Cemeti, once an alternative gallery offering the phenomena and dynamics of a revitalising spirit, is today considered

to be the mainstream.

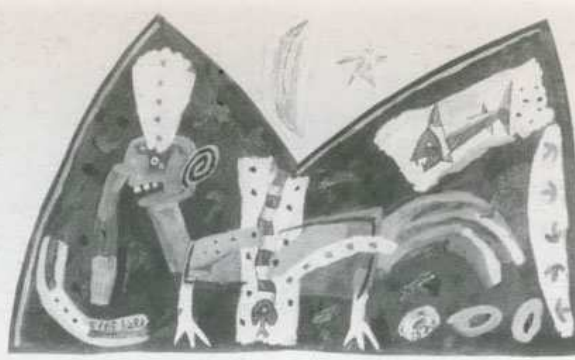
Alternative galleries are badly needed. Who will show experimental works that, in terms of quality, remain “untested” and that, categorically, belong to “the unclear”? It may be that Cemeti Art House is still trying to hold to this commitment. Yet, this “philanthropic” mission may now be too encumbering for the institution. It would be more realistic to hope for emerging new alternative galleries, like Cemeti was once in the past.

Alternatively, artists themselves have to learn from Cemeti on how to establish an artist-run gallery successfully that can survive and grow for fifteen years up.

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M. Agus Burhan



Cemeti, a herald of changing times

Fifteen years ago, Cemeti was a tiny gallery with a faint heartbeat, struggling to grow in the art world of Yogyakarta. Before the public was able to clearly identify its character, the persistence of the gallery's founders in knocking at the doors of artists and art lovers, distributing invitations to visit its continuous programs, was remarkable indeed. However crowded the schedules of these "art promoters" were, at least one second of their time would be captured by the image of Cemeti via their invitations. Devotion and persistence, in the end, provide the capital in a big gamble, especially amidst the Indonesian working ethos which is notorious for its clamour, inconsistency and poor endurance.

A further identifying sign of Cemeti's nature was its curatorial orientation regarding works for exhibition. Since its founding, Cemeti has shown a strong commitment to works with tendencies toward innovation and revitalisation. In Cemeti's framework, innovation is not as rigorous and rigid as that set forth by the New Indonesian Art Movement (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia*); rather, it provides room for the evolving plurality of various phenomena of visual arts. The kinds of works exhibited at Cemeti provide for the mundane, the traditional and the wild, with political and cultural overtones, while adopting limitless media. Such qualities can be observed in the works of Heri Dono, Eddie Hara, Dadang Christanto, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Agung Kurniawan, Mella Jaarsma, and Anusapati. Together with several other young artists, these names represented a maverick layer, subversively challenging the major trend of

aestheticism in Indonesian art. Meanwhile, in the background, there was an intensified aestheticism celebrating an Indonesian art boom at the end of the 1980s. It is here that Cemeti Gallery provided corridors for artists with aesthetic codes beyond the "mainstream". Observers began to identify Cemeti as an alternative gallery amid the many commercial galleries in Indonesia.

The label of alternative gallery may be taken to signify participation in managing an art world that is undergoing change. Ever since the 1980s, the aesthetic paradigms of Indonesian art have been gradually shifting. Art embodying a modernist spirit that is elitist-esoteric with its principles of harmony being both complex and essentialist, has shifted to art with a contemporary spirit oriented to mundane, everyday life, with its principles of harmony adopting paradoxical juxtapositions. Art does not preoccupy itself with just developing concepts and significance, but it also deals with sensations, ironies, and parodies. It is within such a paradigm that installations, happening art, and performance art, as well as all kinds of new media art are granted the opportunity to develop. These expressions are, increasingly, searching for an art-world venue that provides space for them. Artists need art institutions and supporting communities with new visions. Cemeti and the role it performs, has proven to be effective in developing new supporting communities for such "alternative art". In the end, through all of the bargaining processes over position, Cemeti cannot be considered simply as a place for artists that the market has rejected. Because of

Cemeti's strong influences on contemporary concepts through its curatorial processes, an artist must strive to deserve an opportunity to exhibit there. Cemeti Art House, as its most recent name, has become one of agents of change in the dialectic processes toward contemporary art paradigms in Indonesia.

In these dialectic processes, the existence of Cemeti can also be seen to be signifying the rise of a strong decentralising spirit. The orientation of stakeholders and art managers in terms of both the concepts and policies employed has, until now, been centralised. This surely has had an effect on the shaping of the market taste, as well as on strategies in art and culture. With its ever-broadening international performance and global networks, Cemeti possesses a sound cultural capital to challenge centralist policy orientations. Its bargaining capacity now has support in the Cemeti Art Foundation which operates in the realm of contemporary art discourse.

In this situation, Cemeti has evolved into a new authority in the world of contemporary art in Indonesia. Several artists and components outside Cemeti have come to feel the predominance of Cemeti's role. In the dialectic processes, working strategies and resilience in striving to overcome barricades of norms and art policies will always incur controversies and disagreements. However, there is now a response in the growth of similar art institutions in Yogyakarta, Bandung and Jakarta. Cemeti's example has inspired further developments in Indonesian contemporary art.

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