

# Fifteen years on Yogyakarta's

## Cemeti keeps art in the house

**W**hile artists here have more commercial opportunities than before and the public is showing a greater appreciation of fine art, Yogyakarta's Cemeti Art House (Rumah Seni Cemeti) is one of the few galleries in the country that are not profit driven.

Cemeti, which had its 15th anniversary last month, is considered non-commercial by some local artists, as it houses a number of experimental artworks, which are mostly not for sale. Other artists have

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blasted Cemeti, saying that its management does not think practically — not about the artists' daily needs or the future of their careers.

Cemeti owners, Nindityo Adipurnomo and Mella Jaarsma, who are both installation artists — and also husband and wife — take such com-

ments in their stride.

"We know how tricky it is to market artworks, especially paintings. Moreover, we don't have enough money to play the game with art collectors and dealers," said Nindityo who studied at The State Academy of Fine Arts, in Rijksacademie, Amsterdam in 1986.

Nindityo's argument is not without grounds, in the late 1980s — dubbed by art critics here as the "painting boom" — wealthy people and art connoisseurs, as well as entrepreneurs, began to see local art-



JP/Asip A Hasani

Artists Mella Jaarsma (left) and Nindityo Adipurnomo stand inside their gallery Rumah Seni Cemeti (Cemeti Art House) in Yogyakarta. The gallery is renowned as an alternative exhibition space, where artists can show experimental works without the pressure to sell.

work and paintings as valuable investments. They spent money on art regardless of the painters' reputations or the quality of the works.

A doorway was opened for new names in the fine arts circle. Nindityo believes that this happened due to the absence of a credible institution or art critics who could help people to determine the merit of an artwork.

Nindityo and Mella established Cemeti in 1988. Painters Heri Dono and Eddie Hara, and sculptor Anusapati were also involved at that time. They rented a small house on Jl. Ngadisuryan with a 70-square-meter front room, which was ideal for a gallery. In the first 6 months, the exhibition space was named Ruang Pamer Cemeti (Cemeti Exhibition Room) before becoming Cemeti Modern Gallery. In 1994 the name was changed again to Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery.

"It is rather strange that we used the words contemporary art because here we were never really interested in modernism," Nindityo said.

Cemeti was unusual for a gallery of the 1980's, when new galleries were mushrooming and painting exhibitions were frequently held. Instead of becoming part of the mainstream, Cemeti was a venue for installation and performance art, which were not really popular back then.

In 1993, for instance, Bandung installation artist Andar

Manik dug a hole in the floor of Cemeti's exhibition room as part of his artwork. The Ruang Rupa artists actually dined in the exhibition room in the name of art. Having finished their meals, they left rubbish and remnants of food scattered on the floor for almost a month, until the end of the exhibition.

Foreign artists, like Ichi Ikeda of Japan and Ye Shufang of Singapore, have displayed their works in Cemeti and Mella — who graduated from the Minerva University, Groningen — also frequently exhibits her pieces of work there.

However, not all the artwork displayed by Cemeti are alternative. Top painters Agus

Suwage, Heri Dono, Eddie Hara, Agung Kurniawan and Murniasih once regularly exhibited in the gallery.

Naming no names, Nindityo recalls how difficult it was to deal with greedy art dealers as well as needy artists. Many times, the artists pulled their works out from Cemeti as they had signed deals with art dealers or other galleries, without Cemeti's knowledge.

"(Our policy) is for the painter to leave their work at Cemeti for at least six months after their exhibition," said Nindityo who was born in Semarang, Central Java.

Disappointment with the local art industry pressed Nindityo and Mella to seek oppor-

tunities abroad. Both made it, although not always in terms of selling works of art.

Cemeti seized the opportunity to regularly supply some modern art museums in Europe with the works of Indonesian artists, including Nindityo's and Mella's. With their wide overseas network, in cooperation with Dutch-funded non-governmental organization Hivos, Cemeti founded Cemeti Art Foundation in 1996.

If Cemeti has stepped outside of the mainstream, it seems to be doing very well. However, Nindityo did say that, "Up until now, our gallery's income doesn't cover its operational costs."