

THE ART OF CELEBRATING OBJECTS

What is an art work? Is it an object (thing) that could get easily identified, isolated, and at once differentiated from other objects (things)? What tools are there for us to categorize, isolate, and finally assess the worth of such? To dub something as 'art' or 'non-art', is it the quality of beauty that matters? Or is it special treatments of objects, a non-pragmatic view of their functions, and the artist's personal intention?

Philosophical grammar is often found laying at the background of an artist's special treatment of objects. This perspective puts a distinct barrier between physical objects and materials. A physical object belongs to the realm of artisans, whose business is to produce or finalize an object before an artist takes it up as an instrument or tool. But, according to this view, artists do not treat the tools made by the artisans as physical objects; to them they are materials. As an artist thinks of an art work and create one with the tools, what he feels deeply is sensitivity of the instruments/materials.

Let's take a paintbrush for example. A brush, to its maker, is a physical object; while the artist shifts its meaning into a material to be sensed. A physical object, in itself, decides its own finality, while a material is open to the artist's sensitivity and intention within the space of creativity.

A material is seen as having the ability to accommodate an artist's feeling or sensitivity; namely, whether the things unite the sensitivity, or it is the artist's sensitivity that puts the things together. It is often said that, when an artist is using a tool, it becomes one with him, or at least it tends to. We might recall how the late Indonesian maestro Affandi used to paint with the palms of his hands, which he took as tools, to feel one with them. He might have felt that stroking the canvas with his own hands was more intimate than squeezing the paint from its tube directly onto it; while the method put him closer than if he applied brush strokes.

Through the differentiation of physical objects and materials, the philosophy of the medium was born. Thus the medium for the art of painting is colors, not paint; the medium for music is tunes, not musical instruments. An artist works on his medium, which is his first material, and with his tool, which is his second material. Such is the modern philosophy of the medium. [1]

Then the question is, if the function of art is its lack of function, what reason does an artist have to insist on creating an art work? The function of art is seen as something non-daily, something impractical. The philosopher Adorno once wrote that art is obviously something we can't find in everyday life, so that we would not easily forget about it as today has pushed yesterday into forgetfulness.

The pragmatic/practical needs are fulfilled by the 'non-artists', including artisans or toolmakers. Since the times Romanticism, an artist has been seen as someone special within society, someone whose job is different from others', an awkward and displaced person. Other than garnishing the wall, actually a painting has no apparent reason to exist in the eyes of the beholder. If it is taken as beauty itself or as something about beauty, then a sneer would come out: if beauty exists as if solely so (a painting on the wall), then isn't what is left for us all ugliness? [2]. Or, if the paintings, as today's, look ugly, if they seem to deliberately defy the idea of beauty, why would we cherish such things?

Today, if an artist says that his art is for beauty, which beauty is it that he means? Aren't we all seeing beauty everywhere, on things we consume, day by day? Has beauty ceased to exist

within the realm of artistic creation, as it seems to be more and more attached to the output of mass production, to everyday objects?

One of the strongest views of art concerns intention. Even if the creator of an art work is unknown to us, even if his intention is inaccessible to us, we could sense his presence behind his art work; a person, a subject that wills the work to exist. Because of intention, structure of an art work (which is obviously made, as opposed to natural order) reveals a certain intention. It is said that, within itself, an art work contains an intention, or it expresses intentionality. But such an intention could also come from without; from the observer. As in Leonardo da Vinci's famous assertion, an observer who keenly scans some old walls of rock and colorful marble floors would be able to imagine figures in a fighting scene, weird faces and unfamiliar garments, or anything at all, the limits of which is only set by his own mind. The genius-inventor's desire to find something new through such objects that he observed.

So, is an art work determined by its viewer? The person who creates art works is a single, unique, individual; the ones who see his works are plural, and one-on-one encounters could happen between the work and anybody at all. The creator determines the structure of the work one sees, while the latter confronts a finished work, interpreting it in whichever way. Yet, the conceptual moment only lasts a while; the work itself lasts far longer than that. An art work in itself is a structured intention, while a natural object doesn't have (or doesn't have enough of) such intentionality, because its structure is accidental. This differentiation is taken as fundamental and absolute. [3]

Since Duchamp, we have known that any object or image from daily life could be put into exhibit, and could be claimed by individuals as an art work. It marked the beginning of failure of any attempt to separate art objects from 'non-art' objects in 'qualitative' sense. Artists, since then, seem to go on finding their intentions through daily objects, and their job gets to be redefined as conducting 'baptism' of ordinary objects as 'art'.

Boris Groys said that the characteristic of such art is excess of production. Previously an artist created; now he selects. Ready-mades get born and reborn at the speed of light. This surely puts artisans out of the picture. Facing the siege by industrial objects, to use Duchamp's expression, we feel numbed; we, or artists, could no longer use the criteria of good versus bad to assess the objects.

The difference between art and non-art is not at the realm of materials anymore. It couldn't give us any information concerning the status of the object that we call art. There is nothing within the object itself that gives it a valid reason to be art. When we can no longer tell which is art and which isn't, said Danto, then it is the signal of the end of art. Art, then, is shifted into a philosophical discourse; its narration as art or aesthetical object has ended.

According to Boris Groys, Duchamp's ready-mades have defied the differentiation between factory products and art works (as physical objects). Duchamp signed the daily objects with his own name. The objects stayed recognizable by their daily users, but Duchamp was called an artist, not a plumber, because he did not apply the logic of production that separates 'good stuff' from those rejected by the factory standards. With his autonomy, as an artist has, Duchamp made a selection of one object among millions that the same mass production process put forth. There a mystery still remains, said Groys; and that is 'creation'. Contemporary artists in this cease to be producers (of art), but consumers (of things and images) that are circulated in millions and all were made anonymously. [4]

We could still say, too, that in art what is 'bad' cannot be put down, and what is 'good' can't be copied. It follows that the distance between what is art and what is not has transcended the physical or material.

Hans Belting wrote that from the point of view of a historian the cessation of clarity in telling which is art and which is not has opened up new possibilities. It disabled the writing of authoritative history. Now artists have even joined with historians to rethink the function of art and to challenge the traditional aesthetic claims. They no longer be content with studies of the so-called masterpieces, such as the collection of Louvre, but they, so to speak, prefer to confront the entire human history by tapping the resources such as the British Museum. They acknowledge the historicity of past cultures, but they also become aware of their own historicity. Today, inclusive anthropological interests have 'won' over exclusive aesthetic interests. The old antagonism between art and life has gone, since art has lost its frontiers, making itself accessible to other media, the visual and the linguistic alike [5].

The Logic of Art: After Duchamp

Ready-mades and found objects have swept through the Indonesian fine arts since 1970's. We could still remember FX Harsono's mattresses, chains, toy guns, and fried chips; Bonyong Muni Ardhie's headless dolls; Jim Supangkat's alarms; from the New Fine Art Movement show of mid-1970's. Instant creation came alongside instant consumption. The exhibition 'Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi' (Fantasy World Fair) in 1978 was full of factory-made objects or copies of them, set against an urban shopping mall.

Danarto put on blank canvases in 1973, marking the exit of any kind of image from the surface; and then daily objects came to us in art exhibitions. They started an exodus, out of their habitat of pragmatic function, woke certain intentions up, shook the artists' imagination up, and turned exhibition rooms into imitations of daily banalities. D.A. Peransi, for example, took all picture frames off in one of his shows in order to make a 'real presence'. Existence, he then wrote, has preceded essence. In 1987, Arahmaiani brought laundry hooks and told us that they represented a 'wounded bird'.

In 1990's, Indonesian artists took found objects as all the rage, a frenzy sparked by Heri Dono's grotesque performance and installation arts. The idea was to make a parody of the mass-produced, technological, cultural objects for daily (and at once mythical) uses. If what is beautiful and perfect has been put forth by industrial processes and made available to us anytime and anywhere, so the logic goes, then what is ugly and imperfect might be worth more to artists. Or, as the artist retreats from the corner of the natural that has been devoured by technological advancement, he makes his point by putting forth some 'expressive designs', as the painter Fadjar Sidik said in 1970's. Sunaryo made installation works based on Philip Stark's furniture design; Asmudjo Jono Irianto's 'Kleptosign' and 'Debt Store' (2002) were full of parodies, achieved by taking in other artists' works and showing ready-mades. Ade Darmawan showed 'Supply and Demand' in 2003-2004, that consisted of a supermarket site, taking on consumerism.

Ready-mades and found objects make it obvious that artists' creative strategy and focus of attention have shifted. The philosophy of the medium, which separates physical objects from the materials as outlined on the above, has been done with. Artists and artisans seem to produce things together and at the same level. To Indonesia, this has changed the art scene formerly dominated by agrarian and traditionalist paintings into something closer to the artists: their more urban faces.

Supermarkets came into Indonesian daily lives since 1970's, creating a new culture. Specialized stores, mostly of imported goods, also could be found easily in big cities. They became the sources of images and things created by anonymous artists from around the world, as far as we are concerned.

Imported architectural designs, which characterize Indonesian housing facilities since then, came hand in hand with the higher demand of imported goods. We could see hybrid architectural designs being materialized in urban settings, and they are the signals of such a demand of hybrid household equipments. Those who designed factory products have, from the beginning, involved architects. They took up 'function' and 'structure' to imitate the language of geometry and rationality of machines. Today, product design is not just an aesthetic project, but it also involves sociology, anthropology, cybernetics, and semiology. Objectivity and rationality of machines have been replaced by consumer approach. A design is essentially a popular expendable phenomenon.

Surely not every artist is interested in taking up the urban themes and development of designs. At the same time, an artist's individuality is not erased, but on the contrary enlarged by, adoption of ready-mades. 'Poor art', namely putting forth seemingly trivial, worthless and simple objects as art, does not impoverish the artist.

What can we think now, about creation in fine arts, after Duchamp, Danarto, FX Harsono, and Jim Supangkat? Can artists step back to create art with the classic or scholastic sense of beauty? What intention isn't washed out when what is art and what is not is now unclear?

This exhibition is an attempt to emphasize the realm of 'goods', 'things', 'objects', for artists who got some interest in the design of shapes, colors, materials and assemblies of this postmodern world's equipments. The goods are specific; they are the things sold at Ace Hardware, a specialized store in Jakarta, itself a part of a chain of stores in major Indonesian cities.

Through such procedures the artists are challenged to recreate their art works' visually and claims based on artistic intentionality. Or perhaps to rethink their own assumptions.

CELEBRATING OBJECTS

Aditya Novali and Titarubi recognize the Ace Hardware's special features and stock. Novali arranges trolleys in a frantic race ending up at a crash on the wall. He adds iron texts alluding to excessive consumerism, the same message as the trolleys show in themselves. There are no shopping goods on them, but the objects are the words.

Titarubi puts objects on the stainless steel rack that she takes in. She makes texts out of plastic grass, which give us consumer psychograph: 'NEED', 'LIKE', 'BUY'. A supermarket is an arena that is exploited to the core by capitalist politico-economy, where information of commodities can be found densely populating the space, as overwhelming as the goods on display. Female shoppers who could easily make the best comparative studies among the goods fail to make the same kind of calculation outside their social context; such a cognitive process is a part of the physical relation of a shopper with the goods on display. [6]. Titarubi considers herself similar to such a consumer.

She uses plastic grass to wrap a precisely and simply designed CD rack, transforming it into a green house with many doors. Her idea is gotten from the real estate development in

Yogyakarta, one of which calls itself 'The Green House', and therefore an irony is inescapable.

Heri Dono chooses a miniature of a trolley, which brings to mind the old vehicles characteristic of his previous works. Several of the miniatures are put together into an evolutionary narration, bearing some objects. This artist feels something mythical in animated objects and images; artificial steam and Christmas lights that seem secular. The bricolage of objects transcends the limits of pragmatic uses.

It is also done by Ade Darmawan. Industrial design brings forth things that become more and more elegant, smaller in size, similar to cutleries. And the artist doesn't miss the fact that new designs are globally launched one after another in light speed.

The face of an iconic artist such as Agus Suwage is a sign full of plays. Is the face art? Or is it the claim that it is art that enables Suwage to sell his self-portraits to consumers?

Asmudjo Jono Irianto breaks porcelain wares and puts them together again, putting 'visual disaster' as a sign on them, added with Acehnese traditional motifs and texts concerning the tsunami disaster. Ceramic wares were one of the earliest 'victims' of mechanical aesthetics at the start of last century, and therefore dubbed 'architecture's accessories'.

Tisna Sanjaya takes up skillful graphic art on a wooden table. The round table bears a number of graphic images and poetic narrations. He quotes images made by Kollwitz, Baselitz, and Japanese comic-book artists; Pablo Neruda's and Goenawan Mohamad's poetry, Sundanese (West Javanese) homilies, and so forth. Sanjaya's round table suggests a never-ending search that has no definite start either; just like the quote taken from the words of Hasan Mustafa, last century's prominent Sundanese poet: "Seeking the West, yet what is found is the East and the East again...."

Yuli Prayitno brings up carvings of handwritten texts which he puts into jars and medicine box as the sign of a search of meaning. The ordinary objects, the parts of the industrial, are to be reviewed as personal. Through a personal experience of things, a social criticism of the world is born.

Sunaryo gives us a parody, "megaLOGman", a he-robot equipped with modern tools as extension of hands. Modern equipments are no longer the sign of continuation of life, but human irrationality. As philosopher Martin Heidegger said, the conflicts in modern societies are founded upon utilization of these equipments or tools. Human and his world of tools ironically stand before an infinite forest of aridity, a painful remembrance of how badly damaged Indonesian rainforests have become today.

S. Teddy D. and Yusra Martunus use simple daily objects, like spades, hangers, wheels, and doorknobs. But, by shifting the context, those objects slowly make our imagination burst with vivacity. Such a context builds a habitat of meanings and a new riddle, a new intention, a new message, so that the objects become other things.

Idioms are scorched iron bars that we can hammer down into anything. Look at Agus Suwage again. The idiom of his self portraits is not merely elastic; it also easily connects with the context of other things. Other objects are useful as accessories, to underline the presence of his own portraits. See Lie Fhung, as well; she puts together a number of objects until they give us an illusion of metamorphosis of meanings. She uses barbecue stove as a narrow container that confines the objects. She also uses poetic texts to carry her messages across;

they are arranged on wood planks that open like an accordion. Semiotically, the tool and object can be utilized as well as read.

Handiwirman and Rudi Mantofani spark our visual and mental illusions.

Handiwirman experimented with the 'skeleton' of a wooden chair. Chairs have been the guinea pigs to modern architects and philosophers, since those objects involve ideas of materials, construction, and space. The sculptural manipulation of chairs through construction and space is believed to be able to start a special visual formula. Recall the chairs of Gerrit Rietveld. To Handiwirman, every object or material is absurd if we let go of literal meanings that sustain their reason to be.

Meanwhile, Mantofani makes us think about tools, about their uses and their odd shapes. What is a tool, in essence? In the context of FX Harsono's works, a tool is a real, concrete, reality. Harsono imitated this reality. Later, the same artist contemplated about what is visual and what is textual, what is real and what is imaginary. Both are brought to us. Tools appear as copies which we could touch, before we consume it to the last crumb.

To be of service to the artists' intentions, the physical objects in you see in this exhibition cannot merely stand on their own. They must endure the exodus and interweave their meanings with others. +++

Notes:

1. Virgil C. Aldrich, "Philosophy of Art" Prentice Hall Inc, 1963
2. Quoted from Satish Kumar, "Ten Thousand Artist, Not One Master" in Suzi Gablik, "Conversations before the End of Time", Thames and Hudson, 1995
3. Jan Mukarovsky, "The Essence of the Visual Arts", in Semiotics of Art, edited by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, The MIT Press, 1976
4. Boris Groys, "On Contemporary Art", in "Outlook!" Cultural Olympiad, International Art Exhibition Athens, 2003
5. Hans Belting, "The End of the History of Art?", translated by Christopher S. Wood, The University of Chicago, 1987
6. John Fiske, "Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life" in "Cultural Studies", edited, and with introduction, by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treicher, Routledge, New York, London, 1992