

April 2010. solo exhibition, Lawangwangi art space Bandung, Indonesia.

“Lama Sabachthani”

“If the symbolic image comes from the depths of time and the universe, if it expresses something (rationally) uncertain and unthinkable, if it signifies the contact of the present moment with those enigmatic depths (and if its message to me is one of heartbreak and pain), then how could I not talk to it as though it were my own image, facing me, outside of me, still and forever me?” [1]- Henri Lefebvre, “The Message of the Crucified Sun”

What serves as the focus of reflection among artists today is no longer something that is beautiful. Indeed, we have once understood the beauty as a kind of order that enables the encounter, and even the union, between (the sensitivity of) the beauty and everything that is (seen as) good. This encounter is intended to give rise to the “highest good” (*summum bonum*), to use the term from the medieval, Scholastic era. Today, however, artwork has become increasingly individualized into the artist’s personal self, and the personal is akin to a private space that can never be entirely reformulated. An artist will keep on trying to “invent” his or her own language, instead of merely “discovering” what is within the treasury of the language itself.

The beauty is imaginary, said Sartre. We cannot come across beauty in reality or in the real. The real itself never exists as the beauty. Beauty is a value that is applicable only for the imaginary. At that point, beauty simultaneously negates the world precisely in its most essential structure. It will therefore be foolish to confuse between the moralistic and the aesthetics. The extreme beauty of a woman, said Sartre, kills the desire for her. We cannot simultaneously place ourselves on the aesthetic plane—as we admire this irreality—and on the realizing plane of physical possession. Desire is the plunge into the heart of existence, into what is most contingent and most absurd.

Aesthetic contemplation of real objects, said Sartre further, has the same structure as paramnesia. Here, the real object functions as an analogon for itself in the past. Paramnesia differs from aesthetic attitude as memory differs from imagination.

Sartre indeed used paintings as an example, as it presents everything within the scope of the imaginary. The beauty that Sartre envisioned as existing in artwork is a transcendental beauty, something that exists beyond the real. Beauty exists actually outside the real world and cannot be experienced as a process of perceptions, stated Sartre. He believed that aesthetic enjoyment is real, but it should not be grasped for itself. With painting, for example, it is as if it has been produced by real colors. In fact, however, aesthetic enjoyment is only a manner of apprehending the unreal object and is not directed onto the real painting. Aesthetic enjoyment occurs through the real canvas to constitute imaginary objects. [2]

Today, artists want to have “the return to the real”. They precisely wish to plunge into the heart of the real existence, although what is real is also traumatic. Indeed, it is traumatic because encounters with the real are elusive. The real cannot be represented; it can only be replicated—and even *must* be replicated (Lacan). [3] Examples of this are Warhol’s repetitions.

The artists today no longer wish to obtain beauty, especially in the artwork; neither do they wish to serve merely the imaginary. They seem to be filled with passion. Their “aesthetics” is often a kind of numb aesthetic, making people to be seemingly not able to make any judgment about such phenomenon.

Indeed, the artists go to the world of objects, or perhaps it is the world of paramnesia. But the artists have made their own objects, although often with similarities or references—creating a kind of analogy—with regards to what has been made in the past. Here they easily combine the real with the imaginary. Is it not true, then, that what they actually want to discover is some sort of “beauty” out of the traumatic events in the world, in the real?

“Sound... coming not from the soft and subtle, but instead like a calling from the mountain...”

Observe, for example, Christine's guillotine in this exhibition. The object is made to scale; its size is similar with that of the real thing, following the model of the real guillotine. We know of the "greatness" and fame of this object as the official tool to execute people during the French Revolution in the eighteenth century. Today, the guillotine is arranged alongside a number of other peculiar objects, giving rise to a plural situation of observations. The monumentality, historicity, transience, movements, sounds, clashes, violence, eeriness, and sadism—together or individually—form a vortex of plural images.

Christine confirms her option or decision to present such objects: "The object (of guillotine) is able to create strong, loud, and piercing sounds. Initially, I chose a weaving machine, but it could only give me rather flat sounds. It is critical to obtain the sound with the quality of a strong calling. There is the element of enthusiasm, reducing the distance between the caller and the intended receiver, and perhaps it will be appropriate to use such an extreme medium as the guillotine."

The structure of the object constituting the sound function is created by installing three knives; each of them is twenty centimeter wide, on the mouth of the object, which has been covered in a layer of asphalt. The up-and-down movements of the knives are controlled through two series of gears and two dynamos. The regular, sequential movements of the three knives tighten and slacken the strings with metallic balls, as the strings are pulled and paid out. The collisions between the iron balls—constituting a part of the musical instrument whose sound resembles that of a miniature Balinese *gamelan*—create rich jingling sounds.

Each one of the knives is around nine kg in weight, and they will all fall from the height that is only a little greater than the ideal size for humans—the only creature on earth who we think will surrender its life and lay its neck in the guillotine's mouth below. To Christine, the sounds remind her of a kind of calling. The work is a rich, imaginative work, and one that is able to create certain tragic emotions.

It is at this point that she begins the strategy of appropriation or textual crossover. Christine quotes words from the wealth of Christian tradition: "Lama Sabachthani." Jesus, with his mouth dry, uttered the words as he approached his death on the cross, at the most tragic end of his life, with two outlaws on his right and left, on the hill. With his dying words—Jesus' last words, according to the accounts and testimonies in the bible—he completed his work of salvation on Earth.

"About three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'" (Marc 15: 34; also Matthew 27: 46)

To Christine, that is the "ultimate calling" that she understands as constituting the essence of relations in life: intimacy between those calling and those being called. Its echo spreads far and deep into her personal life. Today, in the hills of Mekarwangi, it forms a part of what she calls "a harsh experience, an intimate calling to The Maker, but there are still elements of joy that seep in due to this ultimate calling." [4]

I quote Christine: "The context (for these words) must be renewed spiritually... The "Lama Sabachthani Club" is a theme that brings to the ultimate condition and affirms the intimate relationship between the 'human being' and the Maker... This is non-negotiable... no matter to whom this calling is directed, there is this joyful intimacy. [Club means that it is] done using a merrier approach; one that almost resembles the atmosphere in which the clubbers seek to refresh themselves in a room beset by music.

"This thematic background (i.e. the crucifixion) is nothing foreign for any artist. What this theme wishes to convey is the message of the "ultimate calling" and the intimacy of such calling, which differs in every belief, as I think every religion has its own ultimate event portraying such calling. They are recorded differently, but the intimate quality of this calling will be the same. We can all be present with the spirit to be intimately focused on the one goal, with the spirit to be come together as a group..."

Word is an event. The same words, with the thematic content that remains the same, have allegorically been transformed into a series of processes or "event" of merrier artwork. In the artist's own words: "a kind of clubbing event."

Words, however, do not remain only in sounds (in the literary culture); "words" as "events" are also constructed out of images. [5]

Apparently, Christine is interested in the religious-theological context of such calling and its relevance for today's world as well as for herself as an artist. For months, she has gone through intensive communication and collaboration to create this series of works together with another artist. "Clubbing" here, therefore, can also signify the experience of togetherness in the intensity of "lama sabachthani" calling. Whether an artist creates the artwork as a religious process—for the religious artists—or as a kind of entertainment or pleasure—for the artists who do not concern themselves with the formality of religions—all these possibilities converge in the work presented by Deden Sambas, the artist who has been working with Christine as her colleague: the ultimate entertainment is found in devotions. Whether you go for religious devotions or for clubbing, the objective is the same: to refresh yourself.

Deden Sambas is a meticulous artist-executor who brings Christine's three-dimensional works to their final forms. He is the architect for these peculiar objects. He is a self-taught artist and a rover, living in Bandung, and is interested in the art practices and communities, using natural approaches. His intuitions say that everything in his life is art. Deden also has certain sensibility especially about his own body as an unexpected instrument that he can use as he likes in performance pieces. (He presents a work of performance art at the opening of the exhibition.) When he was a teenager, he once worked as a driver's assistant at public transportation vehicle going from Surabaya to Bandung and back. He then worked for a few years at Studio R-66, an art institution in Bandung. Apparently, this experience made him know many artists better. Christine's interest in working with Deden has been due to his sensibility to create images through sounds as well as his mastery in producing objects for that aim.

Christine herself is a Catholic. She often questions the intersubjective relations that often create problems for her. She thinks that intersubjective relationship can never be absolute. Such relationship constitutes merely superficial encounters; no permanent relations can emerge from it. She once said how a layer of glue, no matter how thin, will damage or even harm the skin surface in the relation between two people. In short, for Christine, intersubjective relation is invariably a difficult relation, if not downright impossible. Even sitting together in a public bus, looking at each other or touching each other, is already difficult for Christine. What does such communication mean? Why do people have that look? What is the meaning of physical encounters?

In most cases, the problems in the intersubjective relations can be found again in Christine's works, including in this exhibition. Observing the issue using this perspective, the call "lama sabachthani", full with theological and religious meanings, has been brought down to earth through the representation of real object, without ignoring the presence of the imaginary that creates an arrangement of new meanings for this object. Apparently, the work has transformed the theological relations into interhuman relations, with all the banality, bitterness, and tragic aspects.

If the habitus of sounds constitutes the interpretations of the words, the thrusts of the three guillotine knives are akin to the heavy breaths from the intersubjective calling of "lama sabachthani", without the "Eloi". It is also here that the allusion to the crucifixion unexpectedly appears in the guillotine, by means of the three knives with one cavity, reminding us of the three crucified figures in Golgotha as the Bible tells us.

"Perhaps it is like there are three crucified figures, with only one cavity to make the calling..." Christine says.

Each of the sound has a meaning, how to "deal with the sad"...

Another object presented in this exhibition, *Lama Sabakhtani #02*, is in the form of a candle with upside-down fire. The candle is 170 cm long, with a diameter of 12 cm. The object is hung, swinging, and cut through by a device that will slowly melt the candle. Several nails as big as thumbs, straight as well as curved, have been inserted when the candle was being made. As the candle melts, the nails will fall. The "merriment" created by the falling nails, with the upside-down candle, makes piercing tapping sound, echoed by the aluminum surface.

Tragic images such as destruction, fragility, and even annihilation of forms, reappear as we observe this object.

The third object in the "Lama Sabakhtani Club" is in the form of a mini typing machine in silver color, with eighteen long arms with no pads. It gives an impression of a search, but also injustice. This is *Lama Sabakhtani #03*. The long, thin arms immediately remind us of the wild lines in Christine's paintings; lines that seem to be searching for a certain moorage. There are only three letters: G, O, D. With the pain inflicted on the tips of our fingers as we type using padless arms, the three letters gradually assert their presence. Again, the sign that Christine uses here is the "accidental" tapping that create different compositions or music. The sounds are present due to the tapping on the flat aluminum surface, complete with a

hidden music box. Does Christine deliberately hide the semantic play between the sound and the secret? Is something hiding behind the sound, or is there an event that will remain concealed behind the sound?

Christine explains her three object works: “The three of them produce sounds, calling, which no longer present texts, including the text of ‘lama sabachthani’... They merely produce sounds, or a collection of sounds, all of them contain a message of ‘how to deal with sadness’.”

Apparently, Christine’s artistic idea is allegorical idea with allusions toward religiosity and even references to the religious texts that she has so far believed in and simultaneously reinterpreted. She has been making works of art with such references for quite a while, as is evident in her previous exhibitions.

Allegories are a kind of symbol(ization), but they reveal fragility or frailty of a symbol, the transience and the misleading victory about the ‘arbitrariness of signs’. Allegories are indeed similar with symbols, but they reveal the material relations of signs/significations and the possibility for further meaning, especially vis-à-vis the meanings that emerge due to the perceptions of the persons interpreting.

To speak allegorically is to speak in front of the public, because allegories are different forms of communication (*allos*: other, plus *agoreuein*: to speak publicly). Allegories play an important role in religious aesthetics or “allegorical aesthetics”. Concealment and distortion are the essence of allegories. The allegorical urge is the urge to reveal the elements coming from the real or natural understanding, transforming them and placing them in a new, different light, with different perspective. Symbols have to do with only one meaning, while allegories are open to the plurality of meanings, because their worldly link and existence are evident. The material dimension of a symbol will no longer be noted when the meanings have been captured. Meanwhile, allegories affirm their physical essence.

Due to the significance of the physical sensations, studies about art will give us an extraordinary perspective that we can use to analyze religious practices. [6]

The impression and image of destruction, frailty, and collapse give rise to perceptions about tragic emotions that seem to serve as the basis of the making of Christine’s allegorical works in this exhibition.

Since the time of Aristotle, emotions are interpreted as a mixture of a variety of feelings accompanied with certain beliefs about the world. The structure of belief in the world is internal in nature, for example in relation to feelings of pity or fear. The belief structure is based on the perception about the role of fate or luck in our lives. For example, you will not pity someone if you do not hold any belief that says how the person does not deserve the pain. When we think that the pain has been created due to the bad options taken by that person, generally we feel no compassion toward that person. In other words: the emotional structure actually demands the existence of opposite beliefs. [7]

It seems that the belief how intersubjective relations are unattainable—although one still needs to work on achieving them—forms the basis of certain emotions in Christine’s works: emotions about the dark side of life, pain, bitterness, etc. These are allegorical forms that emerge through narrative objects, which precisely negate the existence of humans in them, although humans are still present in her two-dimensional works. With the subjective emotions that tend to play tragic notes, words, symbols, objects, signs, and events taking place in the long series of narratives and the past darkness are taken over and transformed into the search for meaning and the personal pain.

Christine calls the two-dimensional works in this exhibition as “working drafts”. The paintings were created gradually as she proceeded with her three-dimensional works in Bandung and Yogyakarta, seemingly serve as the witness of the ups and downs in the journey of the “Lama Sabakhtani Club”. There are pictures about how the devices might work, scribbling, interrupting the peculiar figures of human beings that fill the canvases.

Like in other works that she has created so far, here we find again principal elements such as the red color lines, the bright cadmium red, and the dominant ivory-black clusters. The colors are produced from oil-paint bars that have liberated her further in creating the atmosphere of drawing works or the linear nature of her works.

Her canvas planes are like thin, ripped pieces of paper; the blackness resembles the darkness of the night with the power to change things, and the white color floats like clouds. The red lines here and there give the impression of raw wounds. Lines appear like threads, giving the impression of collectedness, as well as fragile and vulnerable feelings of

connectedness. Such lines appear winding, fractured, or scrawny in several places, going to all directions. Under the shadow of the nails, guillotine, strings, balls, and the type machine's sharp arms, the works remind us of a certain Eva Hessian atmosphere: between the absurd the collapsed lives.

The black color in the two-dimensional works seems to desire echoing the tragic emotions in the three-dimensional works.
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Jakarta, in the midst of the Easter celebration, April 3, 2010
Hendro Wiyanto/Exhibition Curator

Notes:

[1] Quoted from Henri Lefebvre, "Fifth Prelude: The Message of the Crucified Sun", in *Introduction to Modernity*, Verso, 1995, p. 96

[2] J.P. Sartre, "The Work of Art", in *Aesthetics: Oxford Readings in Philosophy*, edited by Harold Osborn, Oxford University Press, p.32- 38.

[3] See Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real", in *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, 1999, p.132

[4] It is interesting how Christine has chosen to use the words "lama sabachthani", which gives a stronger impression of an implied relationship between two parties, instead the words "It is finished" (John 19:30). The words "It is finished" do not mean that Jesus' pain has been finished or concluded, or that his work of salvation is over. Rather, it signifies "the end that includes the journey from the beginning", "tetelestai", from "telos". It says that Jesus wished convey that it has done thoroughly, "consummatum est". (See A. Gianto, SJ, "Sudah Selesai" in *Dag Dig Dug... Byaar! Kumpulan Ulasan Injil*, Penerbit Kanisius, Yogyakarta, 2004, p. 231, 232).

The statement of "it is finished" does not mean that it is "over", as if there is an objective standard, says Goenawan Mohamad. The word 'finished' is more closely related to the words "done", "complete", the condition of completeness that is seemingly determined by the world that is external to us, by the time that we cannot control. It is at this point that the "word" (never completed) becomes an "event", an "occurrence". (See Goenawan Mohamad, "Fragmen: Peristiwa", *Horison* literary journal, November 2004).

5. Goenawan Mohamad, op.cit.

6. See S.Brent Plate, Walter Benjamin, *Religion, and Aesthetics, Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*, Routledge, 2005, p. 1-13 (Introduction, Creative Aesthetic Creating Religion, p. 39-54 [Allegorical Aesthetics]).

7. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Luck and the Tragic Emotions", in *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 300-305.