

Interview

Mella Jaarsma

interviewed by Remy Jungerman

Mella, you're known as a visual artist and as co-founder of Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta. Why did you move from the Netherlands to Indonesia in the first place?

I travelled in 1983 as a tourist to Indonesia and decided to study there after I'd graduated from the Minerva Art Academy in the Netherlands. I left the Netherlands in 1984, and my former lecturers and colleagues thought I was crazy choosing Indonesia for further studies. Regular questions were: why don't you go to New York? Is there any 'modern' art in Indonesia?

I went to Indonesia because I was looking for a confrontation with another reality, to sharpen my own values and norms, and get a clearer picture, as a 23-year old, of what I was searching for as an artist. I didn't intend to stay there longer than one academic year, but getting involved in the life and art in Jakarta and Yogyakarta made me stay.

The need to make art in Indonesia is directly related to a community, and this appeals to me. Given that art is an unstable system, the self-image of the artist and his/her role in society is always changing, and has more to do with reactions to this society rather than valuing art in itself. Art is not institutionalised and the lack of an established art infrastructure blurs criteria and boundaries. Visual artists are working relatively autonomously, not caught up in the circuit of museum, gallery, media and government support.

How were you received in Indonesia as a visual artist from a different culture? I mean, when were you seen as an Indonesian artist and when weren't you?

Because of my involvement in the art scene in Java, not only as an artist but also as an art worker (Agung Kurniawan's term for art promoter, art manager, curator), I was taken seriously by the other artists, art workers and the public. Coincidentally, Jim Supangkat wrote about my work for a book published in Singapore in 1994, but the article was banned by the Singaporeans because I wasn't an Indonesian. Up until the end of the 1990's, most foreign curators passing through Cemeti Gallery didn't consider my work for two reasons: because they were searching for 'authentic' Indonesian artists and because I found it difficult to be a promoter of the other artists at Cemeti and promote my own work at the same time. Since 1998, entering the era of globalisation, thanks to curators like Joanna Lee, Hou Hanrou, Apinan Poshyananda, Julie Ewington and others, I have been invited to join international exhibitions and events in countries such as Japan, Australia, Singapore, and Thailand, mainly representing 'Indonesia'. I am established in the curatorial system that selects artists to represent a country. Although finally accepted in the international circuit, I still have mixed feelings about representing Indonesia; I always feel that I have to excuse myself for being white, as if I have stolen an opportunity for a 'native' artist. When I was picked up at the airport in Ireland to go to EV+A at Limerick, I got the reaction 'Oh, I thought you'd look more oriental'. Through my work, I try to reject the question of origin and actually

deconstruct identities by producing renewable identities, seeing identity as a transient invention.

How does your Dutch background influence the materials you use in your work?

This is a difficult question for me to answer, because the materials I use are chosen depending on the idea I want to communicate, and this is often related to local and regional factors. Maybe the way I choose materials can be seen as a residue of my Dutch art education; reducing the redundant to the surveyable grid. The materials/media I use are very carefully chosen and the selected materials cannot be substituted by something else because very often the materials are the idioms and meanings of the work, especially since I work with skins. I am interested in working with locally available materials and the choice of the materials must be obvious, to avoid the danger of being trapped in the exotic.

What is the connection between the cloaks you produce and the dominant Islamic religion in Indonesia?

We wear a second skin every day that indicates, for instance, our membership of specific groups in our cultural, social and religious surroundings, and is defined by free or non-free choices. Wearing a veil, covering the body and face, on one hand can be seen as a dress code that signifies the group to which we

belong. On the other hand, it conceals identity much in the way camouflage does. In both cases, it is about giving up individuality and personal identity for the sake of becoming unapproachable and untouchable.

In the works *I am Ethnic I* and *II* I use two whole goatskins for each of the two veils to show the difference in proportion between man and animal. Goats are 'victims' (sacrifices) in Moslem offering ceremonies. A one-week-old baby boy is worth an offering of two goats; a baby girl is worth one. In the first work using cloaks *Hi Inlander* (1998/1999), I connect ideas related to the fragility of modern multi-racial societies with ideas that motivated the racial riots in Indonesia in 1998 and that continue to cause multi-ethnic problems up to the present day. The first veil was made of frog leg skins processed into leather and worn by a man at exhibitions in Bandung and Yogyakarta. I had used frogs before, like in the street performance *Pribumi-Pribumi*; frying frog legs and serving them to the public to open up dialogue about what happened to the ethnic Chinese during the riots. I use frog legs and frog skins to question different roles animals play in human cultures (holy, food, pest, pet, dirty, etc); the Chinese eat frog legs and for the Moslems it is unclean (haram). Since September 11th the veils suddenly got a one-sided interpretation, which I am not very happy with. Everyone who confronts my work is coming at it from different backgrounds and cultures, dealing with highly personal sets of taboos and therefore experiencing the work in different ways. I want my work to relate to these specific audiences, to deal with some of their taboos and interpretations. This takes great sensitivity, and therefore I try to find

ways to open up dialogue, rather than work in a more confrontational way.

I do not look for symbols in order to make a meaningful work of art. I search for a phenomenological reality within images that can speak for themselves – a reality enriched with an intriguing variety of cultural experiences.

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The performance that took place during the opening was a reference to the way foreigners or tourists look at Indonesia. Could you tell more about your motivation for this performance, with its dancers and flashlights?

For me joining the GRID project is an attempt to get back to the time of my arrival in Indonesia and to explore the reasons why I came and stayed here. In 1985, sitting among the tourists, I was intrigued by the Javanese dance, this portrayal of slow movements. An idea developed which I never worked out, but kept in my mind during these 18 years of living here: what would happen if you could only see the dance by flashlight? You would have to guess the movements in between the flashes. The performance *Crash Team* I created for GRID, is meant as a persiflage on the audience of newcomers who like to see reality through the eye of the camera. The two dancers, skilled in traditional Javanese dance techniques, created new movements, crashing into each other with helmets made of buffalo horns. The human need for struggle is the basic principle of traditional concepts, for example in the stories from the Mahabharata, as well as the foundation of global power structures.

The texts you use in one of the works refer to the way people from the outside world look at Indonesia. Can you tell us more about the ambivalent meanings of those words?

I like to play with words and titles. The first pair of words is taken from the Javanese language, and reversed, they signify the opposite. *Londo Ngemis* means 'foreign beggar' and *Ngemis Londo* means 'begging from foreigners'. From the national Indonesian language, I used *Gila Bule* which means 'crazy about foreigners', and *Bule Gila*, 'crazy foreigners'.

By using these words, cut out in the buffalo horn plates, I question my own residence in this hybrid feudal society in Java, where every day I have to deal with the stereotyped roles of the rich foreigner and the foreigner as colonialist and explorer. The work is also about positioning 'the native' and 'the ethnic' and the acknowledgement that these groups could be reversed, depending on their surroundings. It is related to a previous installation I made, called *From Pets to Pest*. I brought squirrel skins from Java to Bangkok. These squirrels were killed by the farmers near Yogyakarta because they are pests, but I sewed them around the trees in a small park in the middle of Bangkok where people go everyday to feed the beloved squirrels living in the trees.