

Indonesian art: Between National History & Personal Memories | CoBo Social



The themes of memory and history are central to Indonesian contemporary art. Art in Indonesia can be generated from the need of rescuing an unspoken past, it becomes a way of articulating longing, or to unravel the Indonesian cultural tangle. Through the work of three artists we look at how memory and national history translates into art.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artists

In 2010 at Galeri Canna, Jakarta, artists Dita Gambiro and Rifqi Sukma presented a work that kept resonating in the hearts of those who experienced it. It was called “Keep it in a warm Place” and consisted in a series of wooden boxes containing transparent letters filled with hair. Only peering inside each box you could read the final sentence: “Rest in Memories”.



'Keep in Warm Place', Dita Gambiro in collaboration with Rifqi Sukma, 2009

Dismembered is an adjective illustrated by Gambiro and Sukma's work. It is also a well-suited term to describe Indonesian history. A history that is yet to be put cohesively together. Only connecting the different individual memories it is possible to compose a collective one.

When it comes to memory, Indonesian artists work on two parallel plans: on one hand they recover their personal history. On the other hand they try to understand how this ties into the wider national narrative.

For them tackling an issue or an historical event with art doesn't simply mean to search for written documentation. This tends in fact to be lacking or biased, so the only choice for artists is to roll up their sleeves and go down in the field.

Bringing first-hand research to their work, the artist-historian sheds light on obscure episodes of recent history. On top of that, the necessary contact with everyday people in the art process amplifies the democratic, community-enhancing role of art.

Political role of memory: Fx Harsono

Fx Harsono has been a militant figure in the Indonesian art scene since the beginning. He was one of the founder of the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement), the main conceptual and socially-engaged movement in Indonesian contemporary art.



'Memory of Survivor', Fx Harsono, 2016, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Fine Art

During the Suharto era his work was a powerful and poetic protest against the dictatorship. Over the course of recent decades though Harsono has focused on re-discovering his Chinese-Indonesian roots and recovering buried or repressed histories.

His interest started from the founding of a series of photographs by his father, documenting the then-unknown killings of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesian villages during the early '50s: "I researched the places and made interviews starting from my hometown," Harsono says, "The artwork that resulted were a denunciation of that tragedy that no one talks about."

After the exhibition based on these researches, people felt the need to connect with the artist. The silence was broken. "They were saying: 'This happened also in my hometown', or 'Also in my village there are these yards'."

A most recent example of Harsono's relentless restoration of a more thorough version of Indonesian history is to find in his 2016 work "Memory of the Survivor". The installation consists in the reconstruction of a home, featuring different vintage objects; old furniture, faded photographs and a radio playing soundtracks from Dutch radio broadcast.

At the centre of the installation there is wheelchair on which a video is projected. In the video Harsono interviews one of the survivors from a massacre of Chinese-Indonesian which happened 1947. A startling, eerie appearance of uncomfortable and painful memories that many don't want to remember. The viewer is transported to another dimension.

About Fx Harsono Fx Harsono was born in Blitar (east Java), Indonesia in 1949. He currently lives and work in Jakarta. He studied painting at STSRI 'ASRI', Yogyakarta. Recent solo exhibitions include: *The Chronicles Of Resilience*, Tyler Rollins, New York, US (2015), *The Life and The Chaos Object, Images and Words Erasmus Huis*, Jakarta, Indonesia (2014), *Beyond Identity*, Nexus Arts Gallery, Adelaide, Australia (2014), *Things Happen When We Remember*, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia (2013), *Writing In The Rain*, Tyler Rollins, New York, US (2010), *FX Harsono: Testimonies*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2009) Group exhibitions include: *20th Biennale Of Sydney*, Sydney Australia (2016) Videos from *South-East Asia* curated by Iola Lenzi, in the framework of Art Paris Art Fair 2015, Grand Palais and at the *Silencio Club*, Paris, France (2015) *Tell Me My Truth*, group exhibition artists from Australia, Asia and the Pacific at 4A, Sydney, Australia (2014), *The Roving Eye*, Contemporary Art From Southeast Asia, Arter Space for Art, Istanbul, Turkey (2014) **Cultural role of memory: Jompet Kuswidananto**

Jompet Kuswidananto's installations depicts body-less characters wearing uniforms, showing how cultural stratifications happened on the island of Java. These characters are often in movement within a multimedia – almost theatrical – setting comprising of video and music.



'Java's Machine Phantasmagoria', Jompet Kuswidananto, 2009

"I think it is important for me to be on the field, to feel I'm part of the matter. To live my life constantly researching," says the artist. Jompet's reliance of first hand sources comes from his scepticism towards formal education, which he describes as being mainly about military history.

To him, art is not meant to advocate his own version of history over the one of others. "My focus is on inquiring the changes in the society. I'm not against other perceptions of history, I'm actually very open about it. I simply don't believe in misinterpretations but in reinterpretations."

This modus operandi is clear in seminal works like “War of Java, Do you Remember?”, and “Java’s Machine Phantasmagoria”, which allude to the war between Javanese and Dutch from 1825 to 1830. The war was lost by the Indonesians and determined the complete control of the island by the Dutch.

The Javanese army was then reduced to a simple formal body and their uniform became just a ceremonial suit. Little by little these started becoming very complicated and symbolic: “From the uniforms you can retrace the Javanese cultural history. You will find the European boots, Buddhist hats, Chinese influences in their music. It’s a form of negotiation of these many complicated layers of culture. Where you put the symbols on your body is about what you want to show and how.”



‘War of Java, Do You Remember?’, Jompet Kuswidananto, 2009



About Jompet Kuswidananto

Jompet Kuswidananto was born in 1976, lives in Bali and Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He studied Communication at Faculty of Social and Political Science of Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta,

Solo Exhibition include: Jompet Kuswidananto – Next Show: Order And After – Ark, Jakarta (2013), Jompet Kuswidananto – On Asphalt – Nanzuka Underground, Tokyo (2012), On Asphalt- Jompet Kuswidananto – Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei (2012), Third Realm, Independent project at 54th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2011), Java's Machine: Family Chronicle, Selasar Sunaryo, Bandung (2011)

Group exhibitions include: Roots. Indonesian Contemporary Art – Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt/Main (2015), 3rd Ural Industrial Biennial Of Contemporary Art- Mobilization – National Center for Contemporary Arts, Yekaterinburg (2015), Missing Links – Modernization and Urban Conditions – Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok (2015), Inexhaustible and Limitless – Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong (2015)

Personal role of memory: Boedi Widjaja

For Boedi Widjaja art is a way to cope with a sense of nostalgia towards his homeland. The artist was forced to leave Indonesia as a little child due to ethnical tensions, and has been living in Singapore ever since.



'Imaginary Homeland', Boedi Widjaja, 2016, Objectifs

Through performances, installation, mark-making, drawing, video and work that requires human interaction, the artist is continuously looking for a sense of connection and belonging.

In his recent show “Imaginary Homeland” at Objectifs, the artist demonstrates that places exist first and foremost in our imagination. “ In Imaginary Homeland I look at how national identity became a very prominent way for me to identify where home was,” he explains. For Boedi the word home isn’t about actual physical space, but it rather describes the relationship each one of us has with a particular place.

While Imaginary Homeland reflects the artist’s personal memory, it also draws from a media imagery shared by all Indonesians. During the show the spectators are asked to reverse the drawings from negative into positive by scanning them with their phone, a symbolically charged gesture that makes the memories come alive again.



'Imaginary Homeland', Boedi Widjaja, 2016, Objectifs

About Boedi Widjaja Boedi Widjaja was born in 1975 in Surakarta, Indonesia, and lives and works in Singapore. Recent accolades include being named one of eleven ArtReview Asia FutureGreats (2014); receiving the Grand Prize (Sound Arts; with David Letellier) at Bains Numeriques in France (2012); First Prize in the Land Transport Authority Art Competition – Beauty World Station (2012); Finalist for Celeste Prize (2012); and Highly Commended Award at the 31st UOB Painting of the Year (2012). Solo exhibitions include Jendela Visual Arts Space, Esplanade Singapore (2014); The Substation, Singapore (2012), Yellow River Arts Centre Singapore base at the opening of Gillman Barracks (2012). Widjaja has shown in group exhibitions at National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, Centrale Montemartini in Rome, Museum of Sydney.

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.