Keynote Address: "Claiming Ownership of One's Freed Selves": Freedom, Art and Morality in Indonesia

By Laksmi Pamuntjak

Australian National University
20 November 2019

1.

Dr. Jacqui Baker, Professor Edward Aspinall, Board of Trustees, Members of the Indonesia Council Open Conference, Faculty, Friends,

The first thing I would like to tell you is thank you. I'm delighted to be here today for several reasons, not least for the tremendous honor you have given me, out of all the individuals you could have invited, to be your keynote speaker. But some of those reasons, I must confess, are self-serving.

I'm delighted to be here, firstly, because I didn't think I would actually overcome those weeks of crippling fright and sleeplessness and nausea at the thought of standing before you today, in this room full of specialists, to share something of what I know as a professional generalist. I say this for that's how I often think of us writers: we are in the business of knowing a little of everything and sometimes we get away with it—with being general. (Some of us don't actually even write that much.) But every time we get invited to speak at a formal academic gathering, especially of this scale and gravity, we are reminded that our real expertise, if it could be called an expertise at all, lies in our experience of seeing, and of distilling what we see, into our writing.

Secondly, I'm delighted that I will get to talk about no less abstract, no less ridiculed, no less glorified, no less personal, but also no less sublime a subject as art. The novelist George Eliot tells us, in an essay on German realism, that "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot." What she means by this, as the literary critic James Wood suggests, is that "art isn't the same as life, but very close to it, and that apparently slight distance ("nearest thing") is actually a canyon, the large distance of artifice."

Truth be told, one of the reasons I'm glad to be talking about art, and not about politics, is that I'm not too optimistic about Jokowi's second term, despite some of the cosmetic alterations he's made to his new cabinet—and I don't want to pretend that I am. And I say this not because I'm a morbid pessimist, but because, like many of us who voted for Jokowi in 2014, and again in 2019, I see our country backsliding on the very issues we elected him for in order to uphold in the first place—human rights, religious tolerance, a quality of democracy, and a tougher stance toward hardline Islamic groups—issues we had given him much leeway on to tackle realistically come his second term.

Jokowi's alarming recent support for the regressive amendments to the Criminal Code and the founding statute of Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) suggests a resistance on his part beyond a mere lack of understanding on the fundamental importance of the basic rights these institutions represent—basic rights upon which his much-lauded economic program, too, would ultimately rest. To dismiss this fact is to dishonor what over 50,000 students across more than 20 provinces of Indonesia had stood up for two months ago. Yet, against so bleak a prognosis, I still believe in one thing: that in the worst of times, the most hopeless of situations, art gives us hope.

For art is to me first and foremost about ways of seeing. As the Indonesian art critic and curator Enin Supriyanto reminds us, the evolution of Indonesian temporary art since the 70s has always been a reflection of changing social and political dynamics. Yet "no one artist—no one person for that matter—" he says, "can individually or exclusively change the world." Art is its own realm; it has a life of its own, is a force unto itself. It is neither subordinate to social and political change, nor does it depend on it for inspiration and sustenance. What it does, however, is offer alternative narratives about the world—narratives of symbol and meaning—and a language that not only expresses one's whole sense of being in the world, but also speaks to us privately, exclusively, as what always happens between the spectator and the image.

And, surely, it's nice to go about our lives knowing that there are different ways of seeing, and of being in this world; knowing that even within one person, there reside multiple identities and consciousness, that we are not just the 'one thing.' It's nice, surely, to know that in both our pluralities and limitations, we can say and do something about what we see, transform our gaze into action.

Thirdly, I'm especially delighted to be here because this feels like a coming home to me. I've lived in Australia for nine years, at different times of my life, in various capacities, as a matriculating high school student, as a student of piano, as a student of Asian Studies, as a young mother, and as a partner and all-in-all support system. And even though it seems like a lifetime, or lifetimes ago now, I've just realized anew how important those years were in my formation not only as a student in the regular sense of the word—as in someone whose motto is, cue Chardin, "I find no pleasure other than learning"—but also as a student of Indonesia, and as a student of life.

We are often told that 'real life' is the life that awaits us after we left school—as if what we went through at school was not life, as if all the lessons we acquired outside of school were the only wisdom that would help us survive in the 'real world.' What I mean by being a student of 'life' is how we honor the lessons we've learned along the way that might help us in reflecting continuously on certain questions life keeps throwing back at us, whether we like it or not—questions such as what freedom really means, or what it really means to be free. Something, in other words, that art may give us. After all, "Life, when not a school for heartlessness, is an education in sympathy." That's Susan Sontag, in an essay on the art of the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski entitled *The Wisdom Project*.

Last but not least, here I am, standing before you, 21 years since *reformasi*—that abstract, all-encompassing, but strangely abiding term we've come to embrace as a turning point in our experience with democracy. 21 years since the fall of Suharto, and barely three months after students across my country—in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Malang, Purwokerto, Jambi, Semarang, Medan, Banjarmasin, Kendari—took to the streets in defense of democracy.

Student Protest, September 2019
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/7baNmmVfvTTJgHA96 (Tirto.id)

The feeling—or, rather, the quality of delight—this particular point gives me is far more complex, because as with everything we care about, there is an attendant anxiety to our delighting, a plea for lastingness.

You see, I have a little history in this regard: my honors thesis at Murdoch University in 1993 is on the Indonesian Student Movement in the 80s and 90's—for which I'm indebted to many of you in this room, and especially to Professor Edward Aspinall, who has kindly invited me to this forum today, for his excellent PhD thesis on the same subject.

It delights me a little, as well, that based on said fact, I may well not be the oldest person in this room—thank God—or the only person, by dint of our age, or our discipline, or both, with an especial interest or even a personal investment in the historical momentousness of that day, 21 May 1998. Yet I'm certain that two months ago, in September 2019, I wasn't the only person in this room who was

summoned to the indelible memory of hundreds of students in May 1998 marching up and down the vast expanse in front of the Parliament building, waving Indonesian flags and chanting "*Reformasi*!", effectively taking back what the New Order regime had previously brandished as its self-legitimizing slogan and reinvesting it with the proper spirit and meaning of the word.

To have witnessed, then, twenty-one years on, the same intensity and urgency in today's youth in claiming not only their right to democracy, but also a *quality* of democracy, is to have our faith in history—or rather, in the sense of duty that history instills in its youth toward its predecessors and successors—restored, at least for now. And this feels all the more bracing because we are so used to poking fun at, or even dismissing the millennials for being self-centered and indifferent to social issues.

What distinguishes today's resistance from its predecessors—both in 1966 and in 1998—are the students' fluidity and the sheer breadth of their demands, particularly on things that directly affect their daily lives and personal freedoms.

Comparing 1966, 1998 & 2019' Student Protests
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/YcCacTgLGyMyTNa1A (*Koran Madura*)

In 1966, the student protests were backed by Suharto and the army and focused on specific macro issues: lowering prices, reforming the cabinet and abolishing the Indonesian Communist Party. In 1998, there was only one united cause: the overthrow of the Suharto regime. In 2019, we heard calls that were wide-ranging and sectoral: from eradicating corruption to ending military action in West Papua, from protecting minority groups to addressing unresolved human rights violations. The danger of fragmentation is always there, sure, but breadth doesn't have to be a bad thing, for it can also be a reflection on a greater political awareness. What was most striking, however, was the confidence with which the students told the state to stay the hell out of their personal lives.

Student Protest, Yogyakarta, 2019: "My breasts are not your business."

Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/UWmH78812FP91hUkA (Fajar)

2019 Student Protest Poster in Batam

Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/tNsuAvGcaMRNMXDRVE8 (*Batam News*)

The fact that they wore their resistance with humor, bordering on joyful abandon, also signals that not all is wrong with the times.

Student Protest, 2019: "My crotch is not the property of the state!"

Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/qF8FffU2WsXx8kAa8 (Akurat News)

Student Protest, Banjarmasin, 2019:
"I'm the one who's having sex, what business is it of the state's?"

Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/wa1KPVi4riRPsukr8 (Redaksi Nasional)

Student Protest, Jakarta, 2019:
"It's fine for my makeup to wear off, as long as justice doesn't wear off."

Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/EirfLqcizKTEDEgVA (Okezone Nasional)

Or, rather, that *we* are not that out of touch with the times. In fact, what we saw unleashed two months ago, in the way that it did—with the full might of digital technology behind it notwithstanding—would not have been achievable in a different time, by a different generation. It speaks to a certain truth about the priorities of today's youth, the things they can and cannot tolerate, and how art may yet thrive in this condition. Hence my delight in being here with you today, because I want to talk about hope.

2.

I first came to Australia in 1989, to Perth, to matriculate from high school. I remember not being very happy at the time. I was only 17 and having the time of my life as a boarder at a very liberal, multicultural school in Singapore, and the idea of suddenly having all that freedom taken away by moving to an all-girls school, Presbyterian Ladies' College no less, felt to me like a regression, an entrapment of sorts, a punishment. I sat it out in the end, but I was dying to go to uni. But when I did, to Murdoch, I was not prepared for quite the extent to which I was going to experience the golden age of Asian Studies.

That Keating's forward-looking Asian vision for Australia should have coincided with the Suharto regime's increasing crackdown on free expression is not lost on me, or on any Indonesian student of Asian Studies in Australia at the time. Ironies aside, I remember watching from afar how students, artists, journalists, NGOs and workers joined forces against the New Order regime. It pained me to be away, to not be taking an active part in history in the making. Yet, objectively speaking, there was no better place to be for an Indonesian student intent on writing on student activism—with all the resources available to her, the kindred spirits around her—

than in one of Australia's leading centers of Southeast Asian research. It was a gift that made no bones about my privilege.

But those years weren't just about that. Those years were also about the fiction I read, the music I played, the films I watched, and the art I saw. I might have had James Scott's *Domination and Resistance* for eight months in my bag and leafed through its tattered pages every day as though it were my holy book, but in no other period in my life had I read so many world classics as anyone could bear in a lifetime, or watched so many films that were interesting or important or both.

Most crucial, still, were my discoveries of the two writers and art critics that went on to shape the way I look at art, at writing, and at freedom. I'm talking about the late British essayist and cultural thinker John Berger, whose work *Ways of Seeing* I learned in my first week at Murdoch as a freshman, in a class called Structure, Thought and Reality, and the late American writer, filmmaker and public intellectual Susan Sontag.

The pleasures of discovering them were multiple and infinite, and not just because reading their sublime, erudite prose was often better than looking at the actual artwork under scrutiny. But I think it's because, on a deeper level, reading them allowed me to constantly seek new ways of seeing without sacrificing truth and beauty—classical values I still find important, however highfalutin they sound, however frail they are as guideposts left over from a more innocent past.

In 1993, the year I began my honors thesis, I found Toni Morrison, who has recently passed and left a gaping hole in the lives of many who had read her. I read *Beloved.*

And it changed my life. For the first time, I started thinking more deeply about what freedom means. Until today, one particular phrase in that book lingers in my head: "Freeing oneself is one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self is another." But what does it mean, to begin with, to be free? What does it mean when they say that one is only truly free if one has succeeded in empowering oneself in making decisions about one's own life? What does it mean, to be the subject of one's own story? What does it mean when they say freeing oneself begins with lessons in seeing?

And so began my engagement with art. I began to look at paintings, the way I was taught by my mother when I was growing up.

*

The first thing I learned about seeing is that every viewing of an artwork is private, an experience strictly between the spectator and the image. It speaks to us and us alone, to the particular ways only we can see and look at the world. Only we can ascribe meaning to what we and we alone see, and that vision cannot ever be coaxed, cajoled, let alone corralled into the collective. We all have myriad, often contradictory consciousness, views and opinions that are uniquely ours, gazes that are not reducible to a finite apprehension. We may be liberal in most things, but quite conservative in certain matters—or vice versa. No one, no group of people, can tell us how to feel, what to believe in, whether to pray or not, and how. This right to our singularity belongs not just to artists, but to all of us, because we perform what art tries to have us do all the time, in our everyday lives. Whether or not we assimilate art into political praxis, whether or not we weave politics into our artistic practice, whether or not we engage with art at all, we see and look at and read our world according to what we know and what we believe. This is why all efforts to impose a singular worldview on humanity are doomed to futility.

The second thing I learned is that seeing is an incredibly complex business. Let's say you're looking at a painting, and you don't know anything about it, or about the artist. One may say that as a viewer you're unencumbered by historical interpretations so you can think and say pretty much anything about it. This may sound flippant, yet there is a grain of truth in it—for there really is no 'truth' in painting. As Derrida says, "every painting is always polluted by its framing contexts (the *parergon*), by other impulses that divest it of its supposedly unbiased, autonomous status." And while any 'reading' of an artwork will have to involve both its 'inside' and 'outside,' both are by nature fragile and contingent, the way our memory and consciousness are.

I learned yet another thing. To me, there is no greater joy, or a greater sense of peace than standing before a painting that speaks to me. I know of no greater

freedom. Yet I still carry that line with me everywhere: "Freeing oneself is one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self is another." How does one go about it, claiming that freed self?

*

In 1993, I returned to Jakarta. I was sad to leave Perth, to leave Murdoch, especially as I found myself neither free nor a particularly successful claimant of any of my selves. Neither was I prepared for my return, in 1998, to a much-changed Australia, an Australia that seemed colder, less inclusive with the rise of populists the likes of Pauline Hansen. By then I was a young wife and a young mother of a two-year old daughter, settling in Melbourne, which made the whole thing a profoundly different experience than as the idealistic student of my Murdoch years. The timing also proved doubly frustrating —being away yet again just when Indonesia had achieved the unimaginable, when the dictator was finally down, and the real work of *reformasi* was only beginning.

In 2000, my family and I left Melbourne to return to Jakarta. The city, as anticipated, was brimming with possibilities. I co-founded a bilingual bookstore in Jakarta, and started an independent good food guide series modeled after a similar guide in Melbourne, with a literary bent. It was Melbourne's gift to me, I guess. I had a lot of fun. It was the pre-digital era; and at the time, food writing was not yet perceived as writing, let alone a species of art, with a form, style, philosophy and vocabulary of its own. Food was food, that was the end of the story. But, to me, the guide was more than a literary project. It was also meant as an artistic one, rich in visual delights I felt was in keeping with an era where everyone—writers, artists, journalists, publishers, booksellers, historians—felt inspired and emboldened, in particular by the 1999 Press Law guaranteeing more press freedom. As odd an anecdote as it sounds, this was a watershed moment for me in my own personal

transformation from observer to participant, from art-gazer to art-maker.

Between 2009 and 2011, I was shuttling back and forth from Jakarta to Canberra. It was a very different experience to Perth and Melbourne. At the time, I was working on my first novel, which eventually came out in 2012.

Fast forward six years, to 2015, and I was a novelist working on my third novel in Berlin. I wrote a lot, read a lot, but I was also listening with alarm to worrying news from home. I was particularly vexed about how deeply, unrecognizably polarized society had become, particularly in matters to do with race, ethnicity, religion and belief, as if the conservatism and intolerance that drove it were something new. Yet it later hit me that the steady encroachment of conservative Islamic values on Indonesian culture had been going on for much longer. And not just within the body of political Islam or the mass organizations they spawned, but also in government pandering to Muslim political interests, among businesses fearing government sanctions, and among citizens and individuals demanding stricter policing on morality.

In 2015, Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) statistics show that TV programs targeting pious Muslims were all the rage, with *Mamah dan Aa Beraksi*, hosted by popular woman Muslim preacher Mamah Dedeh, topping the list.

The most popular Islamic TV soap opera of all time, *Tukang Bubur Naik Haji* (*Porridge Seller Goes on Haj*), aired from 2012 to 2017, is currently slated for a rerun.

On the last day of 2017, the *South China Morning Post* published an article on Indonesian TV censorship overdrive, particularly on children's cartoon programs.

Earlier in 2016, CNN Indonesia had issued an apology for blurring the body of a female athlete who was competing in National Sports Week.

Miss Indonesia Censored
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/2LoquhE5pK4a1e9v9 (South China Morning Post)

But the point is not so much that the damage was done as the fact that the close-ups of breasts, thighs and buttocks, regardless of context, are not permitted on TV in the first place, made worse by plans to impose fines on televisions stations that violate the code of conduct.

Television is an industry, after all. Reinforcing Indonesia's rent-seeking mentality is least on its mind, as it only cares about two things—increasing profit, avoiding losses. This must have been the way Japanese home appliances brand Sharp thought when they launched their 'first *halal*-certified refrigerators in Indonesia,' just three months ago, in their bid to exploit the Indonesian government's push for products that satisfy *sharia law* and the Muslim Ulema Council (MUI) whose pockets they will be lining.

It isn’t alone. The Ministry of Industry only two weeks ago launched the country's first locally made *halal* corrective glasses.

This quiet but insidious mainstreaming of conservative values harks back, perhaps, all the way to 2005, the year Agus Suwage's and Davy Linggar's art installation *Pinkswing Park* was attacked as blasphemous and pornographic by Front Pembela Islam a month before the holy month of Ramadan.

Indonesia's anti-pornography law was only adopted four years later, in 2009, and the terms are harsh—displayers of nudity are punishable by up to 10 years of prison and up to $500,000 in fines.

But even at the time the *Pinkswing* controversy took place, Agus Suwage had risked charges that would have landed him in prison for five years. Though he maintained that the law had little impact on art—"since it was already heavily-censored anyway," he said—he was more concerned about the law's impact on women's freedom.

Don't tell me, I know. I was there, on 22 April 2006, in a peaceful rally in Jakarta protesting the Anti-Porno-action and Anti-Pornography Bill. There we were, marching the carnivalesque stretch from the National Monument to the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, with thousands of artists, women's rights activists, students, religious and cultural figures, members of indigenous groups, members of transgender communities, in costumes of all manner, tradition and degrees of uncoveredness—from *koteka* to *kebaya.*

Our message: Don't tell us what to wear or do with our bodies. Two years later, on Pancasila Day on 1 June 2008, the same core group gathered again at the National Monument to reiterate their pro-pluralism message. This time they were attacked by the FPI.

It was against this backdrop of rising homophobia and Islamic intolerance that art had continued to suffer, though in a sporadic, unpredictable way. 2017 was a particularly bad year. In January, the police forced the closure of a South Sulawesi-wide cultural event organized by the Bissu transgender priest community, who have existed in Bugis culture long before Islam arrived in the archipelago.

Bissu Transgender Community Cultural Event
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/ziFHvviRgGvMKhbs8 (*The Jakarta Post*)

Granted, modern Western culture has been slow in acknowledging gender fluidity, but the Bissu, considered 'metagender'—a blend of masculine and feminine, deity and mortal—are a testament to non-binary gender being a centuries-old in Indonesia.

Bissu Fights Back

Image: https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/jk5myb/sulawesis-trans-community-fights-back-against-increasing-hostility (*Vice*)

In May 2017, members of Pemuda Pancasila, a paramilitary political gangster organization that had supported Suharto's military dictatorship, cracked down on Andreas Iswinarno's exhibition at the Indonesian Islamic University in Yogyakarta. The exhibition, entitled *Aku Masih Utuh dan Kata-Kata Belum Binasa (I'm Still Whole and Words Are Not Yet Destroyed),* was a tribute to the poet Wiji Thukul who vanished in the anti-Suharto demonstrations in 1998.

The attackers forced the organizers to take down Wiji Thukul's poetry from the walls because 'he was a Communist,' and threatened to burn down the place.

In July 2017, a public discussion on the erotic literary works of Enny Arrow in Semarang was banned by the police one day before the event. And just eight months ago, in March, the Ancol Dreamland amusement park covered the breasts of two mermaid statues that have been there for 15 years with gold chest wraps.

Covered Breasts of Mermaid Statues
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/MYnYzbQoSp8p5nyE9 (*BBC*)

The management insisted there was no external pressure; they just wanted to be more ‘family-friendly.’

That said, it is getting harder and harder these days to separate rising sectarianism from the democratization of news in the internet age. But the statistics don’t lie. There had been, for instance, more blasphemy cases in the post-*reformasi* era than in the Sukarno and Suharto era, spiking since 2005 all the way through the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and culminating in the felling, in 2017, of former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, a Christian and ethnically Chinese, on charges of blasphemy. Since 2015, there had been a significant increase in state vigilance against the phantom threat of ‘New-Style Communism,’ despite the tremendous gains our comrades in Holland had achieved through the International People’s Tribunal of 1965 Crimes against Humanity they had initiated.

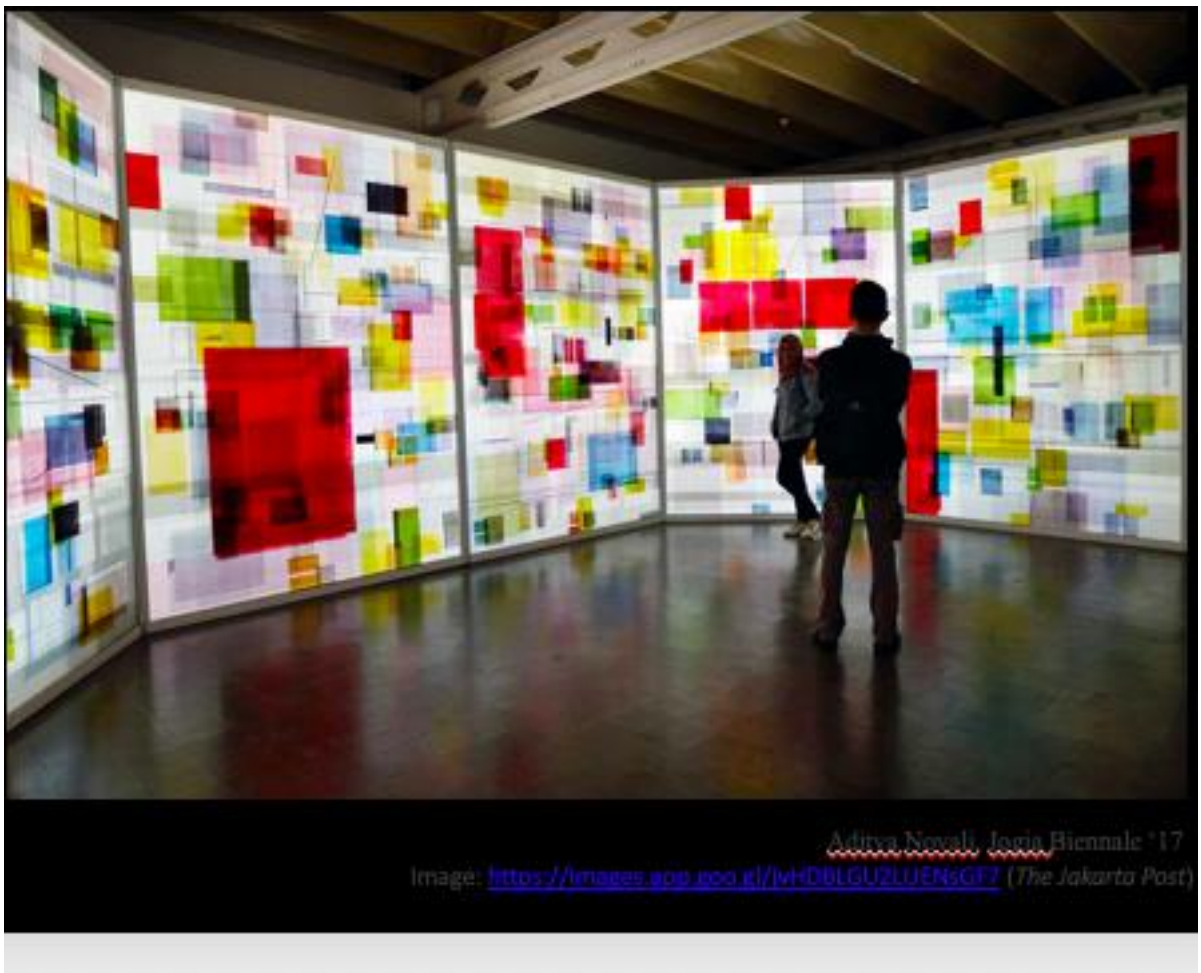
And so it was that in 2017, the themes that had always preoccupied me in my writing—freedom from discrimination, freedom to do whatever we want with our bodies, the right to historical memory, themes we previously didn't have to think twice on—seemed no longer a given. This hit me a little late in the writing process of my novel and had me worried for the first time, partly because I always went with John Berger on why we write: "In the modern world, in which thousands of people are dying every hour as a consequence of politics, no writing anywhere can begin to be credible unless it is informed by political awareness and principles."

That this 'dawning,' if you want, in Berlin should coincide with a changing Germany is quite propitious, I think. Between 2015 and 2017 I was experiencing firsthand a country that, despite its tremendous reservoir of goodwill to reflect on and atone for the collective sin of their Nazi past, was shifting slowly but surely to the right, with rightwing extremism on the rise. It was a Berlin that despite its newfound affluence and its vibrant art scene still bore the scars of division and was helpless in dealing with its modern rekindling. It was a Berlin where many young people born in West Berlin, children of the metropolis, grew up with people who were neither white nor have a German name. Young people who weren't used to giving much thought to the east-west divide, or how Germany had handled reunification up to that point. But when they moved with their parents to the east, they saw firsthand how people raided asylum hostels bearing arms, baseball hats, and Molotov cocktails, how conductors on the tramway checked only the tickets of black passengers. And they were shocked.

But note those years: 2015 to 2017. It wasn't just Germany, or Indonesia, or Britain, that had gone dark. Democracies from the Philippines to South Africa, from Hungary and Venezuela, had tumbled. Across Europe, there was a big loss of support for democracy among *all* age groups, with more young people voting for

far-right, far-left or ideologically fuzzy populists. Trump happened. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

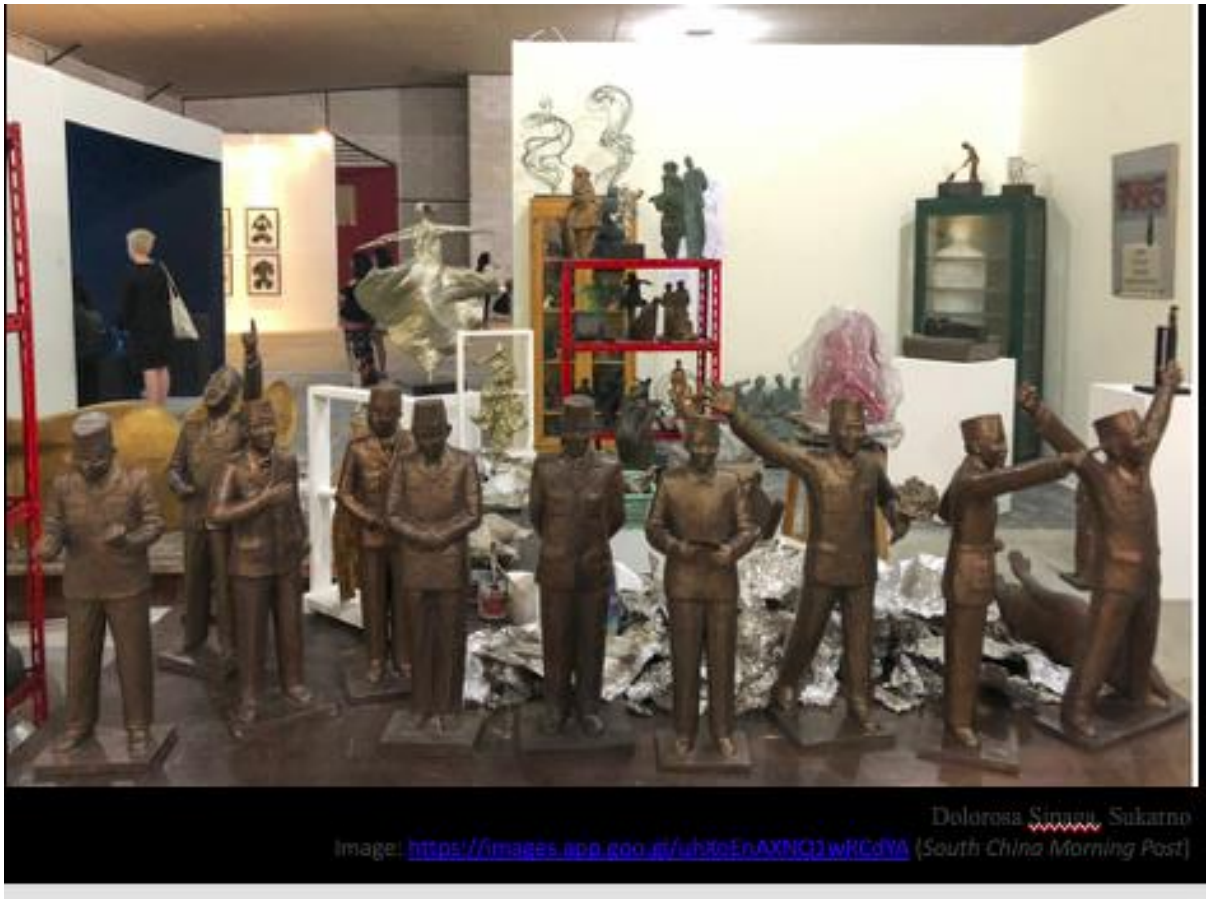
On 9 May 2017, the day Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison, there descended a black cloud over the Indonesian art world. The 14th Biennale Jogja, held in November, in the art city of Yogyakarta, was an embodiment of this mood. Like God whose image cannot be represented visually, not a single image of Ahok could be seen in its spaces. But the air was brimming with his name. From Aditya Novali's *When I Google Ahok*:



a work replete with the color red—the color of blood, violence, communism and the Chinese flag—to Timoteus Anggawan Kusno's *The Death of a Tiger*,

an allusion to the baying for Ahok's blood in the guise of a feudal Javanese sacrificial ritual called *Rampokan Macan*, the exhibition was not just a lament for the death of tolerance and justice; it was also a pained reflection on a nation long-saddled by a history of anti-Chinese violence.

That same month, a similar pall hung over the Jakarta Biennale—also among the region's longest-serving non-profit exhibitions of contemporary art. Among the artworks was an installation by the stalwart sculptor Dolorosa Sinaga, comprising 10 life-size statues of Sukarno:



both the artist and the festival director, Melati Suryodarmo, insisted that the work was not meant as a homage to the man so much as to the ideals he represented: the revolutionary fervor and the inclusive spirit of Pancasila, our national ideology. So, I went deeper into the parallel universe I had created—a novel on art. I went back to the books and authors I discovered in Australia. I went back to Toni Morrison.

3.

Now, I've come to the second thing I would like to tell you. I would like to tell you a few stories of looking. Looking at paintings to be precise.

Story #1.

I'm back at the Gemäldegalerie. I go directly to the Rembrandt Room and I stay there for a good hour. I give it the sort of focus I denied it during my last two visits. In fact, I'm here to see the *Head of Christ,* the one work the Master pronounced to have been 'done from life.' I want to see, as Nina suggested, how it is to reimagine a person one's never met, like my birthfather. A face one's never seen. How to draw the light into, out of, and around it.

*

It's a soft, humble face. Inward, almost resigned. Turned three-quarters left, the head slightly tilted. The right eye raised slightly outward, away from the angle of his left eye. The hair dark brown, the beard full and short. The lips are pensive

and delicate; you can almost see the line connecting them to the eyes heavy with sorrow. Seen from any distance, that riveting triangle of golden light on his cheek, his nose, and his eyes are unalterable and searching, holy and human.

Like Rembrandt's Jewish neighbor, the alleged model of his Christ 'done from life,' my father Bhisma was certainly of life. By that I mean he was very much present in his own life. He was a pampered 'Menteng' boy with a strict but doting mother, an adopted child of Europe, a lucky bastard with a trust fund who died a fake communist. Yet my mother had emphasized his light. 'The moment I first saw him, I swear, he was surrounded by white light,' she said the night she told me about my true origin. She was, of course, talking about something else; she was talking of Bhisma the myth, the warrior-God, he of the white light she had driven deep to the core of her. Divinity is indeed personal. But he had the same high cheekbones as the man on the canvas, the same shallow forehead, the same heavy-lidded eyes set wide and deep.

*

I've been at it, a portrait of my father Bhisma, for hours now. It started with my ego, as it always does. I'm a painter, after all, not a yoga teacher. It's more than a curiosity or a mere desire to see what I never saw, for there's the conqueror in me, needing to define and claim and possess the object of my interest. That's not what art does, *Bapak* used to say, we never really *know* things. But he was always the philosopher and I the self-absorbed artist. And this time the stake is my own birthfather. I have to decide for myself how to look at him.

*

The story I just read is from my latest novel that was just published last month. The title is *Fall Baby*, and it is the sequel to my debut novel, *Amba/The Question of Red*, which was published in Indonesia in 2012. I call it a story because each moment with a painting or an artwork is its own story. In this story, the person doing the looking is Srikandi, and she's the illegitimate daughter of Amba and Bhisma, the protagonists of my first novel. The novel opens with Srikandi, a globetrotting visual artist having just moved to Berlin, at almost 50, to start a new life. There she does what she's done for almost all her life: gaze at paintings. The paintings she looks at are those I've looked at during the two and a half years I was living in Berlin, where the novel is partially set and where I wrote most of the novel.

Why Berlin, you ask. Well, my German publisher is there, for one, and it was they who commissioned me to do a sequel to my first novel, after what they saw as the success of my first novel which they published in 2015. Because of my own personal connection to all things German, I decided to give Srikandi a strong connection with Berlin: her adopted father was German-American, her adopted father, Bhisma, went to medical school in Leipzig in the fifties and traveled often to Berlin. So, it made sense for her to move there: to feel closer spiritually to both her fathers. Besides, it seemed almost criminal for me as the author of the novel to live in Berlin and to not tap into the extraordinarily lively art scene, especially given my fascination with the struggle of Asian artists abroad trying to make the sort of art that acknowledges its debt to its traditional 'roots' but also speaks to their plural, international selves. The sort of art that 'travels,' if you want.

Looking back, I spent a lot of time thinking about those successful contemporary Indonesian artists of the 90s with international exposure—artists such as Arahmaiani and Melati Suryodarmo, who had lived and laboured in the West. I thought about their struggle in navigating the demands of their manifold worlds,

trying to stick to their own idioms while constantly addressing the paradoxes of dual representation: the one that expects them to be sufficiently and uniquely Indonesian, versus the one that expects them to speak in a language that is universal; the one that expects them to embody the political struggle and aspirations of his or her people, versus the one that expects them to transcend clichés of identity and identification through their perceived urbanity.

I understand this is not easy, for at different times, the divided self often brings to the table different notions and understanding of the substance and dimensions of their struggle: what, indeed, is corrupt, lewd, impure, immoral? What do they each look like? When Agus Suwage said, in the wake of the *Pinkswing Park* controversy, that he felt the people didn't really understand the art, he was probably right. They didn't understand it. Agus Suwage had intended his *becak*-like pink swing and his almost naked men and women frolicking in an idealized Garden of Eden as a commentary on the alienation and artificiality of urban culture. But most people including the FPI only saw nudes—and the added insult of casting a popular local soap opera actor in such a light.

In those Berlin years, I was also often reminded of artists like Agung Kurniawan. He is a widely traveled Indonesian artist who, in 1997, had come up with a powerful parody of the Suharto family entitled *Memperingati 30 Tahun Keluarga Suci* (*Commemorating 30 Years of A Holy Family*)

Agung Kurniawan, Memperingati 30 tahun Berkuasanya Keluarga Suci / Commemorating 30 Years Of The Holy Family, charcoal, conté and pastel on paper, 200 x 145 cm, 1997

Agung Kurniawan, Memperingati 30 tahun Berkuasanya Keluarga Suci/Commemorating 30 Years Of The Holy Family

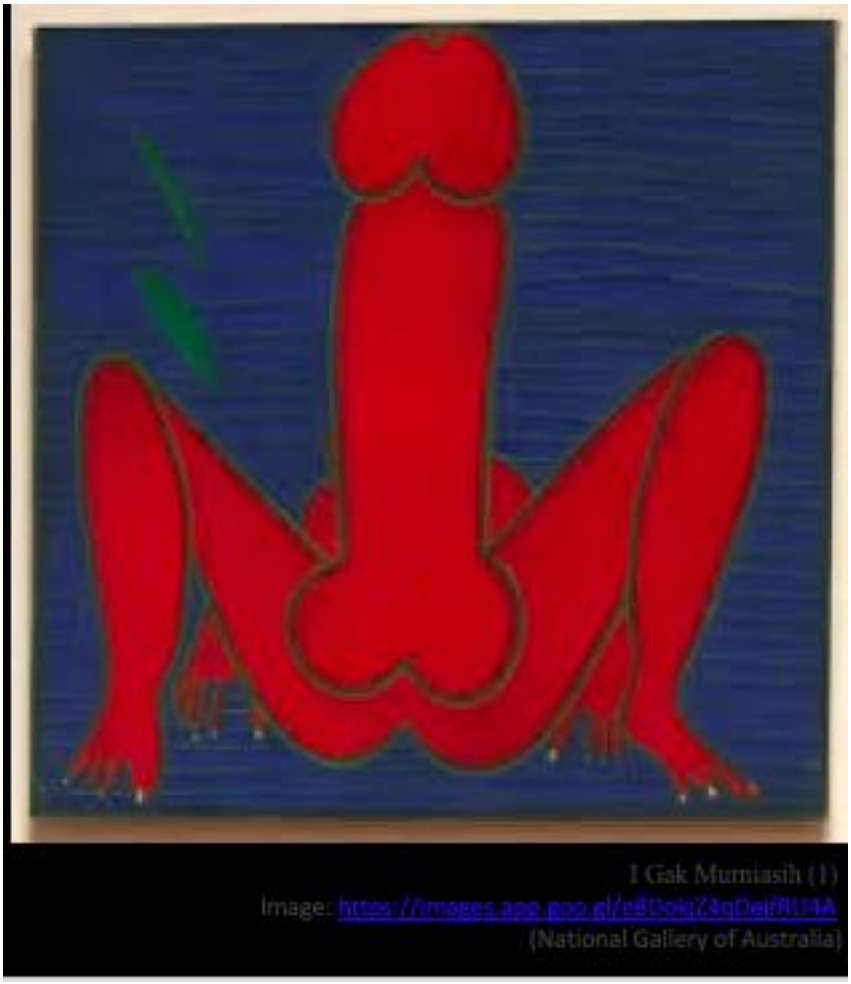
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/uP4eWKP2GDa6dBb7 (Co Bo Social)

only to find out that the fall of the regime not only left artists shorn of a common enemy—i.e. Suharto and the military—but also overwhelmed with old, discreet foes crawling out of the woodwork. For many artists like him, these foes were racism and bigotry.

Deeply disillusioned, Agung briefly produced art that jabbed at too politically self-conscious works—that is, until he realized that those very artworks—'commodity,' he called it—were precisely what the international art world was looking for. Disheartened by what he saw as a form of exoticization, his response was to plunge deep into himself, producing art that was often wild, provocative, and blatant in its pitting of morality against religion. He needed to uncover, in his own words, 'the battered, the ugly, and the decayed' in his own art; he needed to 'break' his 'own taboos.' For only then, he insisted, could he recover his own true artistic motives.

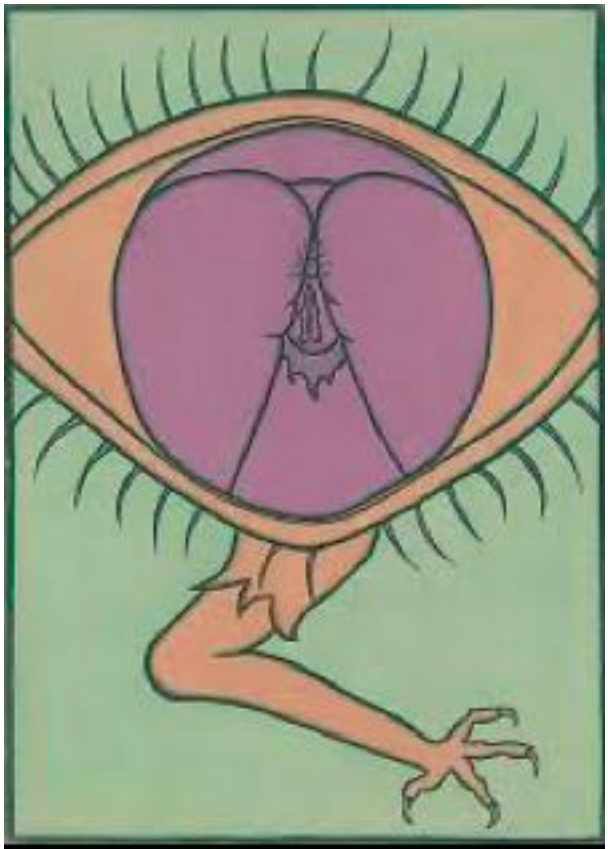
The late I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, known as Murni, is another artist from the post-*reformasi* period I often thought about. I admire her steady, unflinching, deceptively apolitical gaze on her subject—the female and the male genitals as symbols of the woman's erotic experience. I mourn her death 13 years ago, in 2006; at 40, she was too young to die, to not live her talent to the fullest.

Her works are so extraordinary both in its casualness and deference as well as its confidence and absolute control: you are so lucky to have her so close, and to be able to see some of these paintings at the National Gallery whenever you want—this



I Gak Murniasih (1)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/e8DokjZ4qDejfRUJA
(National Gallery of Australia)

and this



I Gak Murniasih (2)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/1AuX7xn3k78fZmmd7
(National Gallery of Australia)

Look at them, so blunt, so succinct, so intelligent, so courageous. I still remember vividly the moment, of studying her works again—some of which earlier this year filled one wall of Museum MACAN in Jakarta:

I Gak Murniasih (4)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/EdnMisc8v6Pc97DY8
(Life as Art Asia--Wordpress)

I Gak Mumiasih (5)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/vonf4dfuupVzF6wU6 (Medium)

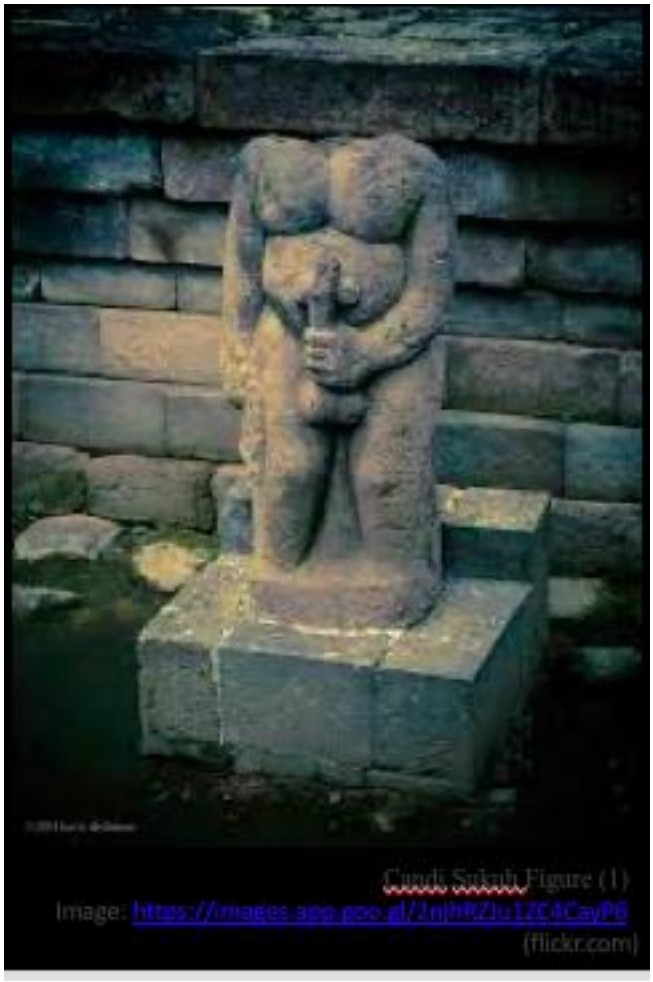
I Gak Murniasih (6)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/EbU4Jr72KuPNfnbD7
(National Gallery of Australia)

in a beautifully curated exhibition on pre-and post-*reformasi* Indonesian contemporary art entitled *Dunia dalam Berita* (The World in the News).

I Gak Murniasih (7)
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/crEHf81e7S2Zm5yt9 (Museum MACAN)

I wanted my hero and anti-hero, Srikandi, to have this kind of clarity—this kind of ethical position.

One day in late 2015, these musings directed my memory to Candi Sukuh, a 15th century Hindu temple on the northwest slopes of Mount Lawu, Central Java, and to one figure in particular: a headless male figure grasping his penis.



It has a very primal, animalistic, almost erotically charged quality to it. What would it be like, I thought to myself, to put a head on it—female, not male. And imagine putting the missing male head onto a female figure, so that we would have a male figure with a vagina and a female figure holding her penis. After all, hasn't the notion that there is a man and a woman in each of us been embedded in our culture for centuries—in South Sulawesi, as I had mentioned earlier, in Bali, throughout Java, in the culture of the Lengger dancers? And thus did the idea of an imagined exhibition of Srikandi's called *Man/Woman Reconfigured* form in my head.

The fact that Candi Sukuh was built in a time Javanese religion and art had diverged from Indian precepts regulating 8th to 10th centuries temples such as the Prambanan suggested that assimilation truly was the substance of culture—

there was, we are reminded, an older civilization in Java before the arrival of Islam in the 16th century.

Sir Thomas Raffles' account of his visit in 1815 also shows that many statues had been thrown down on the ground, broken to pieces—including a giant *lingga* statue—

Candi Sukuh Lingga Yoni Entrance
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/eRboG5z5kmzAF8Rw7
(commons.wikimedia.org)

and most of the figures decapitated, pointing to the effect of the Islamic invasion of Java.

Candi Sukuh Lingga Yoni
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/NrtHu2mHVskGV5GU9 (What an Amazing World!)

I don't think I need to mention how familiar this sounds in light of recent calls by conservative groups to ban traditional art and culture because they do not reflect Islamic values. In fact, the probability that such an exhibition would stoke the ire of conservative and radical religious groups is very high, which is kind of the point.

Meanwhile, there were more angles to the fictional artist's ethical dilemma, of course. An exhibition of sex swap-themed Hindu-Javanese-influenced naked ancient figures is one thing, but how to talk about 1965 from the point of view of an artist whose birthfather, she had just learned, was an ex-political prisoner? In this context, Berlin was a blessed fit. There was a curious sense of solidarity I felt among the Germans I'd met, in many walks of life, over our struggle with our

historical memory. How do we deal with our violent past? How do different generations process historical memory? How does a visual artist like Srikandi—born in 1966, trained in seeing—process '1965" and the history of her parents through her art? How does she imagine the imagined: the things she never experienced, the people she never knew?

It was in pondering this that the story I read came about: its's about Srikandi trying to know the birthfather she never knew by drawing him. It's about her trying to recover a memory—to secure a truth—even though she didn't witness or experience it herself. And this, Story 2, is the initial result:

Story #2.

By mid-July, I have nine of his faces. Mostly in black and white and grey, in pencil, tempera, chalk, and charcoal, with some aubergine, terracotta red, and Azul Maya thrown in. They're not all finished. I don't plan to show the complete series to anyone except Nina and I plan to do a couple more.

I try other things too; some half a dozen *paragone* where I had my father Bhisma side by side with a portrait of Che Guevara; with a bloated and slightly debauched Sukarno, whom Bhisma had once idolized; with a pop art rendition of the angel standing on top of the church in *Wings of Desire*, taking in the city of Berlin.

The exercise in Picasso-style metamorphosis was a no-brainer, conceived in the wee hours of the morning. It was fun seeing him as bone as skull as cantaloupe as pineapple as saxophone.

Nina is happy. She tells me she can see him as a jazz musician, a wine and cocktail man, a poet, a scholar, a healer. Perhaps a very good lover.

I'm happy. I tell her that he was a doctor, a very good one, and it's impossible that

he wasn't all of the other things too.

4.

When I tell you that the novel is about Srikandi, I tell a lie. It's not just about Srikandi—it is also the story of Dara, a human rights and pro-democracy activist. Srikandi and Dara were best friends since primary school, and they fought together in the underground opposition against the Suharto regime. Later they had a major falling out. The animosity lasted for years until they were forced to confront problems larger than their own egos. The two cannot be any more different in personalities and background, even if they believe in and strive for the same values: freedom, democracy, tolerance.

By presenting these two characters, the artist and the activist, I try to offer in this novel the possibility of art and activism not being at odds with one another, given the potential of animosities between them; they might even, either by design or by default, go hand in hand. I'm aware, of course, of the perpetual debate over what makes for a higher value in an artwork: is it the purity—or some might even say innocence—of its intentions, or is it its actual social and political impact? Is activist art inferior to high art, or is art grounded in the act of 'doing' more valuable, especially in today's world, than art for art's sake? Is every act a political act, regardless of its intentions, including the refusal to be political? Is there truth in art? It would be foolish to ignore these questions; as our own history has shown, it was often necessary to take a position. From the persecution, in 1963, of the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto during the period known as Guided Democracy, to the 13-year jailing of the maestro Hendra Gunawan for for his links to the Indonesian Communist Party, from artist-activist Semsar Siahaan's torture

by security forces in 1994 for joining a protest, to the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of dissenting students and artists in the 90s.

Today, there is neither a Left to speak of, nor a totalitarian regime bent on imposing a moral or aesthetic ideal on the vast diversity that is our nation. We are no longer experiencing a New Order-like dichotomy between the state and civil society; in its stead are groups in society duking it out for hegemonic control, with the state either complicit or passive, or too weak to reject a political compromise. The list has been piling up: from Jokowi's reneging on his promise, four years ago, to apologize to victims of '1965' and his controversial appointment of Indonesian Ulema Council's chief Ma'aruf Amin as his vice-president, to the inability, as I mentioned earlier, of the current administration to bend to the students' demands to revoke the Communication Eradication Commission (KPK) revision bill, or to do more than hold off indefinitely the passage of the revision of the Criminal Code threatening democracy and civil liberties. Our struggle is far from over, let me be clear about that.

It is not for art to bear the burden alone, of course. An overview of the past 20 years shows that the longings and preoccupations of art may have veered from resistance against tyranny to activism of another kind, and one that necessarily continues to evolve. But it is precisely for that reason that it bears revisiting, because art is not just the stuff of seeing, it is also the stuff of looking. It is also about fixing one's gaze in a specified direction as opposed to merely perceiving with the eye.

There's yet one more thing. Paraphrasing Susan Sontag, who declared that all writing is a species of remembering, I would like to suggest that while all art is invention, it is also a species of remembering.

5.

In September 2016, there began *Museum Tanpa Tanda Jasa*—or *Unsung Museum*—in Jakarta. It went on to travel the country, featuring the miniature versions of banned, destroyed, removed or censored artworks of the past.

Unsung Museum
Image: https://images.app.goo.gl/oa1UVe98v2KhOCbGA (*The Jakarta Post*)

The series include versions of the works of Agus Suwage's *Pinkswing Park* (2005); Dadang Christanto's *They Gave Evidence* (2002), an equally controversial installation of naked ceramic figures with outstretched arms holding the remnants of victims of political violence; and Galam Zulkifli's *Seri Ilusi # The INDONESIA IDEA*, which was removed in 2016 from the new Terminal 3 complex at Soekarno-Hatta international airport in Jakarta for featuring Communist figure D.N. Aidit in its cleverly illuminated patchwork of iconic figures in Indonesia's nation-building history.

Unsung Museum, Galam Zulkifli, DN Aidit

Image: "Ini Alasan Pelukis Sengaja Memasukkan Wajah D.N. Aidit ke dalam Lukisan di Terminal 3 Bandara Soekarno-Hatta, Polok Satu.id, Friday, 12 August 2016, in MTTJ_E-Catalogue, Unsung Museum

Looming large, too, was one of the most striking moments of Talibanization in recent Indonesian art history: the day *Tiga Mojang*, Nyoman Nuarta's giant 15-meter bronze sculpture of three women in Bekasi, on the outskirts of Jakarta, which had been standing peacefully for years at the entrance to a housing complex without any kind of protest, until they were defaced with spray paint and decried by a group of angry Muslim activists calling themselves Forum Umat Islam (Islamic Community Forum) for being representational of the Holy Trinity.

Unsung Museum, Tiga Mojang

Image: "Besok Jum'at, Walikota Bekasi Akan Bongkar Tugu 'Seronok' Tiga Mojang, VOA-Islam.com, 2010, in MTTJ_E Catalogue, Unsung Museum

The sculptor, who is Balinese, insisted they weren't but on 18 June 2010, under severe pressure from the group suspecting Christianization at work in their town, the local administration took the statues down—statues that had taken almost a year to erect.

Unsung Museum had many marvelous aspects, the most obvious being its mobile and miniature nature. Goethe once said that only when an artwork is common—or made accessible to the public—can one truly learn its intrinsic worth. Art is not to be hogged. But letting it come to you, of course, is even better. The scaled-down rendering of the artworks, in this context, was not merely a practical decision, but as the show's curator Grace Samboh argued, allowed for fresh, unexpected and often enlightening readings of the artwork.

A less pronounced yet refreshingly original of the show's attributes were the parodies it featured along with corresponding news articles on each of the artworks. These parodies remind us of the counter-strategies that flourished in the media, the arts and popular culture during the 90's opposition against the Suharto regime, the most striking being '*plesetan.'* As Edwin Jurriens describes it, *plesetan*—literally 'slip of the tongue,'—"refers to punning or wordgames, in which humorous effects are achieved by interchanging words and their meanings on the basis of sound association." *Plesetan,* as it was deployed by the underground activists of the 90s—as a counter-strategy, as hidden transcripts of the repressed—had curiously been

effective. More than just conveying its grudging of official conscripts, it exposed, more importantly, what it intended to reveal with tactical prudence: to show that the New Order's self-created image of dominance and control was not as it was hyped out to be; it was merely an illusion. Taken together, all these facets combined to produce such an object lesson in seeing and remembering.

That said, not all artists today are that way preoccupied. On the other end of the spectrum, some artists I've spoken to recently lamented what they saw as the increasing 'verbalization' of art. They blamed it not so much on commercialism as to the conceptual itch: "Everybody wants to be a political commentator," said one. "It's as if they don't trust their medium's own force to show, rather than tell." Others complained of today's 'loss of craft,' insisting they'd rather exercise critical detachment from all the 'grandstanding' and 'puffery,' and focus, instead, on the techniques and skills without which good art cannot be made, and on the clarity of the work's substance seen for itself, in its true quality.

Whichever processes are at work, against or in tandem with one another, we'll do well to remember that "it is never," as the great Australian art critic Robert Hughes said, more than three decades ago, "a real artist's interest to 'abolish' the past; it is impossible anyway."

6.

A theorist of visual representations, W. J. T. Mitchell, has argued that paintings, photographs and other images are not just signs which invite us to interpret their meanings and codes. Rather, their power to provoke, preoccupy and persuade — not to mention seduce or satisfy — comes from the reality that, not unlike us living viewers, they too are animated with desires, interests, needs, and drives of their own.

On this note, I'd like to tell—and also close—with the third and last story, which I hope conveys something of that last point I quoted about looking, and how it can often be, and often ends up being a moral act. Because, like every writer, I have turned to another writer and artist many times to see what true humility or greatness looks like and to gauge the distance between it and me. It comforts me to know that dead or living, they are out there, always, as an artistic beacon and as a moral compass.

In the following passages, Srikandi meets our maestro, Sudjojono. It's all fictionalized, of course, tailored here and there to tell *her* story. Part of that story is remembering to pay tribute not just to great artist but also to Mia Bustam, Sudjojono's first wife and mother to her eight children. Not only was she an exquisite subject of some of her husband's paintings, but she was also a talented artist in her own right.

Story #3.

My mother paid us no heed, all her attention riveted on the larger canvases crowding the man's studio. I watched her regard them one by one, taking in their sweep and their details, the labor not just of hand, limb, and eye but also of memory and reflection. She seemed so taken by some of these works to the point of deference and purposefully steered clear of others. There was something strange in the way she avoided the nudes. It was as though she felt the artist had crossed a line, as though she was personally violated. But I liked him. I liked his long, lean face, his unsettling calm, the way his eyes and mouth played up to each other. The way his pipe just kind of held on to the corner of his mouth. The way he kept smoking into my face.

Later, my mother told me his name was Sindudarsono Sudjojono and that he was possibly the greatest artist our country had ever produced. He was also among the unluckiest and the luckiest, for he'd been both spanked and spared by politics, by ideology, by family, by all the forces in one's life that could bury or keep one alive. OK, I said, but what did it have to do with the way he drew or painted? Did it even matter what he knew or saw?

You have a point, she said. But one day you'll understand that when an artist paints two women he loved this way or that, and in the nude, it often has nothing to do with whether he loved one more than the other. For love never loves again the same way.

And because I didn't counter her, she told me that one day, I will also understand why love makes us seek and reject paintings.

'I take it you're speaking from experience,' I said. 'Why is there such a thing as luck?' she said. 'Why is there such a thing as talent?' I said. I could have kept up the riposte because something in her was almost crying for me to. But what do I know anyway, I said instead. I'm only thirteen, after all.

A few days later, she told me: 'There's this painting of his, of his first wife, that always vexes me. On the surface it's so serene, her sitting in a rocking chair, in a pale pink *kebaya*, sewing, pregnant— wilfully lost, it seems, in the domesticity of her life.

What's vexing is that when I look closely at her face, I can only see her as an old woman. This always makes me sad. I don't know why that is. Remember what I told you when we first met the artist at his house eight years ago? About painting the two women you love? Well, Sudjojono married twice; he painted both of them, the first and the second wife, intimately.

You'd suppose he'd loved them both— equally, differently. Strange that I never saw his second wife in any of his paintings as old, not even when I was staring at a painting of her as an older woman. Now, isn't that bizarre?'

My mother's happiness didn't last long, vanishing as soon as it came. I almost expected it, that folding back into her dark blue self. But this didn't change the facts for me. Ever since a painter called Ibra brought a painting of my mother to our house, I knew I would live a painter's life.

Story #4.

The next time I had something of that serenity was in Jakarta, a few weeks later.

It seemed fitting that it had to be at the National Gallery, in front of *Ibu, Menjahit*, *Mother, Sewing,* Sudjojono's 1944 painting of his first wife, Mia Bustam.

It didn't start out that way. Two minutes into locating her, on the far left side of a blue wall, a large group of high school students suddenly flocked in, and the very temperature of the room changed. Not that they were aware of it; they were children, after all. Soon, the canvases too seemed to shrivel and decolorize, and they weren't aware of this either as their attention was riveted to the voice of their art teacher, a shrill-voiced woman in her thirties.

Not long after, a few faces started popping out of the huddle, slowly breaking away. Two of the students went and stood next to me, before the sewing mother. A boy and a girl, rather impossibly. They stayed there, looking at her, for some time—also rather impossibly.

I watched them watching her. They might have looked at her feet, wondering why one was golden and plump, the other pale and skeletal, both somehow not quite touching the floor. They might have admired the easy, almost suave curve of her rocking chair, propping and not propping. They might have looked at the dot of her nipple, firm but modest against the pink of her *kebaya*. They might have been able to see right away that it was the same woman painted unclothed by her husband eleven years later—the same body, the same sinuous grace, the same ample breasts made for far too many babies, the same sinuous grace and ample breasts her husband might have forgotten when he met his new love. Maybe I should write to the National Gallery, good on you, bringing in the future of our nation. Exposing them to art early and teaching them to 'see.'

Who knows, maybe these two saw what I saw—or not. Maybe, one day, they'd come back with their children. Maybe they'd come back just like I did, alone,

tragic, older, blaming their mothers for not being more like them. Blaming their mothers for not making them more like her. Maybe they'd buy her the whole collection, the whole fucking museum.

'She's pregnant,' the girl said.

'She looks like my grandmother when she was young,' the boy said.

'So. What do you think? A boy or a girl?'

'She's floating. She, the chair, the whole thing.'

They both went silent, and then they cracked up. After they all left, a strange calm overcame me. If my mother had seen in a woman unaware of a certain death coming her way, aging before her time, I could only see a woman resting in the solitude of motherhood: a woman to whom the hopes of youth were eternal.

*

The late Mia Bustam, whose memoir, *Aku dan Sudjojono*, is one of the most affecting memoirs I've read, died on 2 January 2011.

Mia Bustam Self Portrait

Cover, Mia Bustam, *Sudjojono dan Aku* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2006)

She might not have been as famous, as fortunate, or as free as her husband. But she had learned to trust her own gaze, both as a writer and painter of her own story. As Sudjojono tells 13-year old Srikandi about her mother Amba, "She has the eye of an artist. One that is free."

I dedicate this keynote to her memory; may she rest in eternal peace.

Thank you.