

FX Harsono

Artist Statement and Biography

Artist Statement

Hindu-Buddhism originated from India and began to enter the Indonesian archipelago in the middle of 4th century, especially in Cirebon. Islam began to spread in Cirebon since the first half of the 14th century, but the Islamic kingdom was founded later on. This was initiated by Sunan Gunung Jati who began to spread the religion in 1528.

As a port city, Cirebon became the transit place between merchants from many places in the world. Some of them then resided in Cirebon, including the ones from Arab and China. This created an unavoidable cross-cultural assimilation process within the society. At a more mundane level, we can see the remnants of the era such as the glass paintings with Islamic iconographies mixed with Hindu icons, still produced by glass painters today. There is also Brai, created in the 14th century, a form of performing arts that recites praises to Allah, and this is still practiced today. Syncretism, mysticism, local cultures, Islamic and Chinese culture blended with visual symbols are unique to Cirebon.

The historical journey of culture and religion has not been separated from industry. Merchants, traditional and modern – or industries – have always been ready to co-opt cultural process, including the spread of religion. Here I see a kind of game, played to deceive the public who are oblivious to the power of industrialization and capitalism. The Muslims' longing for the holy land has become a commodity. Unconsciously, the society accepts the aura of fakery that penetrates and hides amidst the effort of purification.

Artist Biography

FX Harsono **Indonesia**

For the past 30 years, FX Harsono has continually examined – and actively participated in – the social realities of his country. Anchoring himself as a “part of a hybrid identity” in a culture of diversity, his multifaceted work finds its expression in an overwhelming richness of codes and textures, issues and artistic practices. He employs a variety of media, fusing diverse methods, such as performance, installation, printing, photography, photo etching, drawing and text.

Harsono became active in the visual arts world in the middle of the 1970s, prominently as the artist who initiated the Black December declaration, a movement of artists who opposed the institutionalisation of art by the government in 1974. A year later, he and a number of other artists established the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (The New Art Movement), which made several incursions against the aesthetics of visual art at the time, introducing various approaches which were then still regarded as anti-aesthetic and unconventional, such as installation and performance art.

During the 1980s and 1990s Harsono has been involved in what he and his colleagues describe as “Contextual Art” and/or “Awareness Art”. The main goal of this arts movement is to develop an artistic practice that facilitates dialogical communication. He collaborated with activists such as the Association of Indonesian Researchers, and the Vehicle for Living Environment Issues Indonesia (WALHI). *Suara Dari Dasar Bendungan* (Voices from the Bottom of the Dam, 1994), is an example of a work in which he utilised a local story. It is based on a case in Sampang, Madura in 1992, where three farmers were killed by the military for protesting over the government’s plan to eradicate their paddy fields. Harsono went to the village and used objects he found there such as the farmers’ clothes and water jugs, combing them with audio interviewees with the villagers.

A clear shift in Harsono’s practice occurred during the Reformasi (the reformation of the Indonesian government) and the subsequent riots of May 1998 in Indonesia. As can be seen in his performance *Korban Destruksi* (Victims of Destruction, 1997–98) – a homage to the Chinese communities that were violated and burned during the turmoil. Harsono never failed to make social criticisms or to indicate his empathy for those who suffer. Thus his work became more direct, sharp, ironic and bitter, introspective and reflexive. The ambivalent characteristics of a society that was both victim and victimiser, the accuser and the accused, became more prominent.

Since the 2000s, Harsono’s work has become more internal, examining his personal history. Being born in an Indonesian-Chinese background, the history of discrimination and victimization towards the Chinese communities becomes his main focus, while still relating to the development of socio-cultural issues in Indonesia in general. An example is *Cogito Ergo Sum* (2002–2003), made from six panels, each containing a digital print of an ashen white face. Additionally, titles have become an important element. Loaded with symbolism, icons, signs,

codes, text and even rows of letters without meaning, they squint toward the precarious issues of cultural identity.

The semantic and artistic diversity extrapolated in Harsono's use of language and media runs parallel to his concept of identity: "My home land and the roots of my life are not important. History is more important for me than the roots of culture. Identity is not based on the place one comes from, but is more connected to history, and history is not fixed in only one culture, but instead a mix of cultures. Identity has no single meaning for me, but rather is created through diversity. All this makes me a part of a hybrid identity."

This hybrid idea was refined and expressed in his recent works, that are based on the fact that Chinese communities are obliged to change their names from Chinese into Indonesian/Javanese-derived names – a regulation that has been implemented since 1976.

This is depicted in a series of video performances, 'Writing in The Rain' (2011), in which he is writing his Chinese name, Oh Hung Bun, in Chinese script repetitively on a glass wall. The repetitive process of writing his own name is also used in another work, 'In Memory of a Name' (2012), where the Chinese script is overlaid on several prints of his own self-portraits. In a Warholian style, the script dissolves gradually with the duplicates of the portraits. His work, 'Bone Cemetery Monument' (2010–2011), is based on his research and pilgrimage to the sites of mass graveyards of anonymous Chinese communities in Java and Sumatra, victimized during the independence era. In this haunting installation he combines photographs, video documentations and texts with the names of the victims printed on fabric.

Indonesian philosopher ST Sunardi conceives of Harsono's work as both a "retraumatization" and a recovery of the past – such enabling the spectator to access a higher level of understanding. Through aesthetic experimentation he intends to re-read traces of the violent past, not only pointing to the transitoriness of time, values, beliefs, possessions, relationships and one's own personal story, but also the "hybrid" reality of Indonesian society. FX Harsono's works are reaching into the past, present and future at the same time.