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Water Resistance

Ade Darmawan

Cemeti
Institute for Art and Society

ROH

Introduction

Ade Darmawan's extensive research spanning over two decades investigates the enduring interplay between production and consumption within the context of political-historical narratives in Indonesia. Commencing with *Supply and Demand* (2003) and progressing through *Human Resource Development* (2012), *Magic Centre* (2015), and *Doing Business with the Dutch* (2018), Darmawan's scholarly pursuit has transitioned into a new phase. His methodological approach involves dissecting the concept of production-consumption into constituent elements, thereby paving the way for an alternative interpretation of Indonesia's historical trajectory, emphasizing historical violence from the pre-colonial era to the vicissitudes of the New Order regime. This evolutionary research approach represents a notable progression in Darmawan's scholarly oeuvre.

Throughout each exhibition, Darmawan led the audience through his artistic research, engaging their senses and immersing them in his thoughts, which took on a poetic yet approachable form. Often, each exhibition was interconnected with others as the themes themselves were connected. The exhibition *Water Resistance* marked a new stage, using Pramoedya Ananta Toer's book *Arus Balik* (1995) as a starting point to explore the relationship between human production and consumption.

The novel examines the historical maritime culture of Indonesia in the 16th century—colonial era to the vicissitudes of the New Order regime. Darmawan's evolutionary research approach illustrates a transition from maritime to land culture, specifically focusing on agriculture and plantation through the senses and olfactory

experiences. In contrast to his previous solo show, which primarily centered on research related to the New Order regime, *Water Resistance* is anchored in the early stages of the monopoly trade by Western entities via sea routes, initiated by the Portuguese and subsequently taken over by the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). This trade activity resulted in the decline of numerous ports along the north coast of Java Island and ultimately led to the neglect of Indonesia's maritime culture.

Although the book *Arus Balik* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a work of fiction, his meticulous attention to detail successfully presents a series of facts and vivid descriptions of Tuban, a cosmopolitan port city of its time located on the northern coast of East Java. These detailed facts and landscape descriptions are then reinterpreted and translated by Ade Darmawan in his work titled “Tuban.” Various natural resources documented in the book as trade commodities are displayed on a white table, enclosed in glass tubes undergoing a distillation process. On another part of the table, stones, melting limestone, and salt form pieces of the landscape that emphasize the physical and geographical characteristics of the city.

Ade Darmawan gradually unveils the subtle connections between the cultural transitions of the 16th century and those during the New Order era. On the same table, propaganda books in various forms of the “Father of Development” autobiography are placed directly under the distillation tubes, precisely where the tubes drip water. Ade perceives the linkage between these two transitional periods through the replication of extractive practices on natural resources. The autobiographical books are slowly destroyed by the dripping water, accompanied by a fragrant aroma. Beyond

their presence as books, the New Order era is also depicted in another series of works through barrels of oil labeled Pertamina and Japanese-manufactured car engines. These objects are interpreted as markers of the New Order’s transitional period, reflecting the shift from the self-sufficiency of early independence and the Old Order to the modern and global ideas that led to massive product consumption post-1966.

Darmawan's artistic methodology is a seamless blend of industrial and domestic materials with intangible components such as scents, creating a poetic representation of humanity's extractive rapport with nature. The olfactory remnants, a result of the distillation of natural resources, persist as enduring vestiges of the past, evoking sensory responses that take center stage in the absence of physical artifacts of maritime heritage. The choice of aroma as a medium is particularly intriguing because it aptly and simply encapsulates our general forgetfulness of Indonesia's maritime history. It represents an intangible presence that can only be perceived for a relatively brief moment or within a transient context. This particular artistic and poetic form, driven by the profound sensory engagement experienced throughout the research process, evokes a sense of awe and appreciation in the audience.

Having attended several of Darmawan's solo shows, we were deeply impressed by his research's depth and thoroughness, encompassing literature and onsite exploration, and how it translated into a profound and poetic artistic expression. To prepare for this series of exhibitions, Ade Darmawan conducted direct research in the city of Tuban several times since he first began the "Tuban" series in 2018. He considers his physical

presence at the location crucial because the lack of distance between his body and the space or site provides a variety of knowledge, emotions, and sensory experiences, which he acknowledges will influence his artistic decisions.

Water Resistance signifies a new phase in Darmawan's artistic journey following a 12-year hiatus from solo exhibitions in Indonesia. The solo exhibition was presented simultaneously at two sites: Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta and ROH in Jakarta. The exhibition also marks the inception of Cemeti's inaugural chapter, which we refer to as the "Learning Nearby" chapter. This prelude, "Learning Nearby," aims to foster collaborative learning and mutual growth, with plans to materialize through various programs, including public talks, discussions, screenings, artist residencies, group exhibitions, and solo exhibitions.

Within contemporary artistic discourse, Ade Darmawan's creative methodology, which highlights intergenerational knowledge transmission, assumes a profound relevance and timeliness. This approach gains even more significance in the face of rapid technological advancements that often overshadow the protracted processes of knowledge production. By inviting Ade Darmawan to stage a solo exhibition in our gallery, we envision a platform fostering multifaceted dialogues from art to research, materiality, and history. This will play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, inspiring, and engaging our audience and the broader societal milieu. In line with our notion of "Learning Nearby," this brief introduction will precede an in-depth, comprehensive conversation with Ade Darmawan, a collaborative

learning process to grasp his research and firsthand experience thoroughly.

Dito Yuwono & Mira Asriningtyas
Directors
Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society

Conversations Between Ade Darmawan, Dito Yuwono, and Mira Asriningtyas

Dito-Mira: Let's dive right in. We are curious about the ideas and motivations behind the *Water Resistance* exhibition.

Ade: It all started with water. I looked at how our traditions and culture have close connections with water, both sea and rivers. I'm always fascinated by change, and my previous works often question when we began to transform into *homo economicus* or become a capitalistic society. Additionally, I explored how businesses are taking place around them, surrounding this shift from the perspectives of the state, citizens, and others. That's essentially what this project is about. That's why I explore or look at it from how humans view other humans as human resources when humans are seen as sources, as resources, then capitalized, measured, seen, etc. While this time it's actually about water, starting from when did we start to disregard water as a part of our life, our culture? It started from there because we are an archipelagic country, and there are many water sources and so on, but why isn't there a visible close cultural connection with water? In some places, this connection might still exist, but as far as I know, it's slowly eroding.

Dito-Mira: So, how did Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik* inspire you?

Ade: It was after that I started thinking about Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik*. When I read *Arus Balik*, I felt that Pram was illustrating that change. The shift from maritime kingdoms to the inland Mataram Kingdom, and then the Dutch colonization concentrated more on plantations and agriculture. This transition

made people focus on exploiting the land for hundreds of years, a mindset that continued into the Soeharto era. I first read *Arus Balik* in high school. I remember my older brother, Bungen, secretly gave me the book. At that time, it was a photocopy because it was pre-reformation, and reading Pram's books felt thrilling. A while ago, I revisited it with a different approach, focusing on the natural resources mentioned in the book. Pram is incredibly detailed. He lists many natural resources in his writing, and I created a list from it—stones, oil, lime, various plants, leaves, and spices. From that list, I chose 10 types of natural resources to distill.

Dito-Mira: Why did you choose distillation?

Ade: I started exploring distillation a few years ago. Back then, I was also learning about cold pressing, which is another extraction method used for seeds. But that's a different technique and doesn’t involve water. My main question was how to process these natural resources poetically. After a long process, I found distillation fascinating because it’s all about transforming water into different forms. Distillation has been used for centuries to separate water from other elements. In this case, it separates water from the oils within it. What’s interesting is that distillation is widely used in oil refineries today. The oil we use now comes from the same process, heating and separating its elements. This highlights how we've been extracting from nature for ages. The distillation process itself is intricate. For example, steam distillation heats water to create steam, which then passes through leaves to extract essential oils. When the steam condenses back into liquid, it separates into hydrosol and essential oil. To get one kilogram of essential oil, you need 100 kilograms of raw material. It’s a time-consuming process;

distilling sandalwood or nutmeg, for instance, can take up to 20 hours. This is what I find fascinating because I want my work to have its poetic process in itself. So, it has a process that I can't control. I want my work to "run on its own." In this process, I feel like this is the right way to do it. The process itself is a process of chemistry and physics; I can't control how much or what the outcome will be. I imagine it can just unfold on its own.

Dito-Mira: Do you see this as a continuation of your previous works, and if so, how do you personally connect them?

Ade: In my previous projects, it's more or less the same from the books and readings I've encountered. The caricatures I came across from the 60s still resonate today. Issues like corruption, exploitation of natural resources, and the role of officials remain unchanged. Our socio-political problems haven't evolved much. The fact that Pram's *Arus Balik* was banned back then ties into the censorship of the New Order. Through that book, I believe he was critiquing the military, Soeharto, and the exploitation of the land. In my first work titled "Tuban," I dripped the distilled essence onto Soeharto's autobiography, highlighting the connection. I have mixed feelings about that piece. The artwork I see as sort of like revenge but fragrant. So there's a contradiction, there's a contrast that in my opinion, that's what happens now, especially with resources. Soeharto's figure also evokes mixed feelings. He's known as the "Father of Development" but he controversially killed many people while also building the nation. This reflects our cosmology of power. Where good and evil coexist. The feeling I had when dripping the water onto the book. In many previous works, I created relationships between objects that, in my opinion, have such contrasts. There are bitter yet poignant realities, and so on. These mix in the "Tuban" work. Fragrant, but

it drips into his autobiography which glorifies. Dripped using the scent of nutmeg that I found written in Pram's book, banned by Soeharto. The fragrance continues to drip, leaving stains. It's a fragrant scent that damages, capturing the essence of my mixed feelings. Well, there I felt unfinished, that's why I feel the need to continue this exploration in my current project.

Dito-Mira: We understand you've been working on these latest pieces for quite some time and recently returned to Tuban. Can you explain how important it is for you to physically be in Tuban as part of your research? Nowadays, many people think research can be done remotely with technology.

Ade: A while ago, I visited Tuban as part of my initial research because the setting is there. I met Angga Satria or so named, and he's a Tuban historian. He's young, but I don't know his background. I went there together with this young man, Angga. He told a lot of interesting stories because, I don't know if you've been to Tuban or not, Tuban is metropolitan and you can see the remnants of Sunan, there are temples. The temples are huge, and there are so many of them. There's a huge temple by the sea, an Arab village, and Western influences because Tuban was a Majapahit port. This young historian could explain the precise direction of the port and other details firsthand. I visited several sites mentioned in Pram's book, including Awis Krambil village. Although there are no traces of the village now, he speculated its location. This young historian is quite amusing since he has a lot of speculations that I find quite controversial. He also showed me unexcavated Majapahit relics in the middle of villages. I know that Pram is very detailed in describing Tuban. So, at that time I went there by train to Bojonegoro, and from there I was picked up by a friend from Tuban. As we entered Tuban, I was amazed to see the

landscape matching Pram's novel descriptions exactly. Everything slowly started to appear one by one. So for example, like karst stones, various details gradually appeared before my eyes. The natural resources like stones and oil mentioned in Pram's book are all showcased in the Kambang Putih Museum in Tuban. On my last visit, I kept shuttling between Tuban and its coastal areas, like Tambakboyo and its surroundings. On the way there, I saw Pertamina oil fields and sites. So these resources are not just natural as in herbs but natural resources in general. Well, for this exhibition, I want to continue exploring these themes. If before it was more into specifics, now I want to continue to other resources. While the previous focus was more poetic, now I want to delve into other resources. So, besides stones, lime, and soil, oil emerged from my recent visit. That's why I use a lot of used oil drums, waste oil. This ties back to my earlier works with similar contrasts and mixtures. So there will be drums, and it will smell fragrant, but at the same time, it will be in the form of used drums. My work plays with the history of the objects I use, like old oil drums for distillation. I have a somewhat brutal plan I recently tested: using a Pertamina drum with their logo, filling it with water, and heating it. The steam will come out, but I want to infuse it with sandalwood. So, people will see a provocative image, a burning Pertamina drum but the scent coming out is sandalwood.

Dito-Mira: It seems intentional that distillation involves extracting, and in this context, it's about extracting natural resources, making the work poetic in many layers.

Ade: Poetic in many layers, and at the same time, it reflects our relationship with nature. Our relationship with nature is extractive. It's almost impossible to imagine living without that extractive process now. I don't want to be moralistic, saying we shouldn't do

this or that. This is a realism that acknowledges our complicated, often harsh relationship with nature.

Dito-Mira: I also appreciate the decision regarding the scent. I mean, imagining the traces of our relationship with water that aren't visible. You can feel them, but they're so faint, just passing through. Plus, reading *Arus Balik,* evokes that cosmopolitan imagery. The cosmopolitan of the past and the present we envision are vastly different, now manifesting as traces in the form of that scent. There's no tangible form because it could be there but so delicate, then it fades away.

Ade: Nowadays, we largely turn our backs on water. It's not in front of our homes; it's always in the background, always a dumping ground. The banks of rivers are always associated with slums. Outside, they call it the "riverside." It reminds me of when Ale had an apartment by the Kalibata Riverside, teased by Ameng, "Riverside, riverside, you keep saying that, just say *pinggir kali!* (Indonesian slang for slumps of river bank)" So you can imagine, just from the term "riverside," what comes to mind isn't beauty. The riverside is not something beautiful. This degradation isn't just from domestic waste but also from factories. At this point, I come back to the question of when this situation began. Perhaps it's because our focus as humans has shifted. What's been happening for centuries, continued and accumulated, and now we're no longer connected to nature, especially to water. I often joke with Gentong, for instance, when we travel along the Pantura (an abbreviation of "Pantai Utara"/North Coast/Trans Java), how absurdly close it is to maritime life, yet their food is catfish with spicy peanut sauce. Jakarta is all about catfish. Jakarta is just a few kilometers from the sea, yet we don't feel that we live close to it, unless we go to Sumatra, to Kalimantan, it's not that bad even

though it's faintly visible. Histories like this don’t even become stories; they become ghosts.

Dito-Mira: What’s fascinating about this interview, beyond our reading of *Arus Balik* and following your artistic practice, is your creative method. Nowadays, this kind of approach might not be common. For us, it’s crucial to delve into how you move from reading and observing social situations to onsite visits and then translating these into visual forms with poetic choices. This interview serves to document that process.

Ade: Really? Shouldn't people nowadays be more advanced? Don't they research too?

Dito-Mira: The research approach you envision seems quite different. We notice a rapid acceleration in how things are done today. When we ask when you started, you mention 2018 for this series and 2003 for your interest in production-consumption relations, meaning it’s all connected for almost twenty years. With the acceleration brought by information technology, most people today don’t feel the need for such long periods. Just this series alone, starting in 2018, means it has been six years. Can you imagine? Six years is a long time. This feels much longer and might seem unnecessary to a generation used to rapid technological advancements. The meaning of research has shifted, often becoming merely observational. It’s challenging to reach essential decisions like yours, where you choose scent as the form. You chose the simplest yet most epistemologically clear form. The simplest and most essential form. Many might overlook researching with their bodies. You couldn’t determine the final form of this work until you went to Tuban. The decision hadn't happened because your research wasn’t complete without being

there physically. Yet, your work and research process are deeply sensory. This is a very decolonial aestheSis. Even if you didn't have a breakthrough in Tuban, you became certain, it had to be scent, it had to be exhaust fumes, and so on. Some things can only be felt when you are there. You need to be physically present to make those decisions. I think these aspects are fascinating to explore and document.

Ade: Yeah, that's true. It aligns with my thoughts about sensitivity, and you're right about the need to go to Tuban. It wasn't just to confirm things but also because I believe in the importance of body presence. I don't know a more precise term for it, but maybe this is what distinguishes artistic research from other types. When you observe, there's distance. What sets it apart is that physical embodiment. When I went to Tuban, aside from gathering materials, it made me certain about my direction. I usually call it "folding," where after researching, you either fold it in or you don't. By "not folding," I mean people who do extensive research, but their work just looks like a direct outcome of that research. The question then is, what am I (as a viewer) supposed to do? If someone's research spans a year, am I expected to grasp it in ten minutes? It doesn't work that way. I often feel that art merely aestheticizes research, making it pretty and visual. There are many instances of this phenomenon. Sometimes it works, but to me, it feels cold and less poetic. There isn't much "folding" involved. These folds require bodily sensitivity, closeness, and time. I remember a piece by a Colombian artist, Carlos Munoz, about missing activists. His work was just stainless steel plates lined up on a wall. You had to breathe on the plates, and from the breath's vapor, portraits of the activists appeared and then

vanished again. Somehow, this (form) is kind of simple, but you can’t achieve it without a strong sense of sensitivity.

Dito-Mira: What's interesting is that finding approaches like this, where the research is deeply intertwined and the result feels "complete" doesn't always have to reference the older generation. Nowadays, there are few who show signs of leaning towards this method. The next issue isn’t just about whether it works or not, but because the cold forms you mentioned are continually reproduced and accepted as the correct method, it makes things less poetic. There’s a reluctance to rethink how extensive research can be processed into something poetic or as you said, how it can be understood quickly since we’ll never have the same amount of time to delve into the depth of the research.

Ade: Exactly. If you just want to present research findings, you better give a talk. Half an hour, and you're done, why bother creating an artwork? At the same time, there's a misunderstanding about what artistic research is. I always emphasize artistic research because it’s very different from academic research. With research, you want to prove a diagnosis or test a hypothesis, but with creation, it's different. It’s about experimenting and finding new artistic languages. As you said, we may need to develop another language (both in approach and artistry). With the current acceleration and production orientation, everything tends to become more product-like. As a result, artworks often end up as mere decoration. There’s a sort of mannerism where the output has to look a certain way because it's easier to replicate.

Dito-Mira: Yes, because discoveries happen so quickly now, references are obtained rapidly, which means they often don’t appreciate the references they find. Going back to when you read

Arus Balik, information distribution was tightly controlled. You recall how you got the book from your brother in photocopied form because the government banned its distribution. This made you appreciate the knowledge from the book more than if you had just bought it at a bookstore or read references online. We think this greatly influences how you translate that knowledge into your work. Nowadays, the rapid flow of information often leads to reactive responses, leaving little room to truly process and understand knowledge before transforming it into something else. It’s worth examining how this acceleration affects trends and how we measure the excellence of works created in this fast-paced environment.

Ade: Maybe the way we measure it is different too. That’s why I always enjoy more chaotic forms, like memes. They appear quickly and are forgotten just as fast. Perhaps that's the current language, where information comes and goes in a split second, so the logic follows that pattern.

Dito-Mira: So, we're sort of looking for equivalents here. Equivalents from the past with all its complexities, what approaches today come close to? Memes are quite fascinating because they extract from so many things and need that punchline, meaning they're carefully crafted to deliver a quick impact, sometimes in just a single image. To make a good one, you have to be witty, many attempt it but fail to capture that essence.

Ade: You know about *Freeze Magazine*, right? The person behind it isn't as serious as their Instagram might show. He’s an art historian, a total nerd, really smart. He truly understands what he’s doing and has even written a fantastic book on memes.

Dito-Mira: Going back to your approach, when did you feel the need to start adopting this kind of research approach?

Ade: I'd say it began around '97 with my exhibition at Cemeti if I remember correctly. That marked a shift in what I'd describe as more expressive modes. In that exhibition, I started examining patterns of production and consumption in society, which led me to explore topics like consumer habits and anxieties, and even their intersections with religion and other societal elements at the time. It's fair to say that the exhibition marked the beginning of my observation of artistic expressions within society that I felt were starting to be incorporated. So, if you're asking when it all started, that's where it began. After that, I went to the Netherlands for the Rijks Academy. In my first year there, I was quite focused on painting, but eventually, I shifted gears. I realized I was more comfortable with graphics and drawing rather than traditional painting techniques. Even now, whether it's installations or other projects, they usually stem from writing, sketching, or conceptual drawings. Alongside this, I developed a deep fascination with books. Beyond being conduits of knowledge transfer, books inherently embody graphic elements. My excitement for them extends quite far. I feel most at ease surrounded by books and printed materials. As for fiction, I have very few because I've never been particularly drawn to them; perhaps I struggle with them because they don't stick in my memory as easily.

Dito-Mira: What's intriguing about your story is that your solo exhibition 12 years ago prominently featured many non-fiction books from the New Order era. Yet, your current exhibition seems heavily influenced by *Arus Balik*, which, despite its detailed historical narrative, is still considered a work of fiction.

Ade: Well, I wanted to clarify that. Reading *Arus Bali*k wasn't like reading fiction for me. I wasn't so much interested in its characters or dramatic storyline, but rather in the knowledge it contained. That's why I compiled a list of the resources mentioned in the book, its historical details, architecture, and various other aspects. So, for me, reading it was more like reading a compendium of knowledge, a sort of historical book.

Dito-Mira: Okay, so the artworks in the *Water Resistance* exhibition can be traced back to your exhibition in '97?

Ade: If we trace it back, it starts from my project *Supply and Demand,* which was exhibited at CCF (Institut Français Indonésie) back then. So, you could say it all began from that exhibition, exploring production and consumption patterns, and how people can live differently. Then, there was *Human Resource Development* (Ark Gallery), which still had an interest in exploring those themes. After that, it just evolved from there. So, even though the artworks in this exhibition were started about eight years ago, it's like the next chapter. When I start reading or looking for material to develop ideas, I find several books that I think have the potential to become a project or something I immerse myself in. For example, the exhibition *Magic Center* (Portikus) was also drawn from those ideas. In *Human Resources Development*, there was a piece titled "How to Become Rich," which was a publication from *Magic Center*. Then, when it came to Portikus, I specifically targeted the *Magic Center* because I thought the title of the book was crazy. I see books in general like trees, with branches that I can trace, their leaves, and even discovering other ecosystems related to that book. The way I see it is like these books are connected, like a mind map of knowledge with branches and occasional overlaps. I can trace back to one or two artworks, one

or two elements from that exhibition, which I then developed into another solo exhibition.

Dito-Mira: In terms of your research methods, have you noticed any shifts or characteristics that you've become aware of?

Ade: As I mentioned earlier, it can start from one book or even just one sentence that grabs me. I jump from there and start looking for materials because of that one sentence, for example. I don't imagine it like designing where research comes first, then creation or expression follows. My method always goes hand in hand. When I read a book or research something, I usually start working on its materiality right away. I'm interested in its material history, the history of the object's materiality, so both aspects progress together. Working on the material also influences how I develop the research further. So, research, artistic expression, and sometimes political strategy run parallel and contribute to each other. I never think, "Okay, now I'm researching, then I'll stop, and then I'll think about how to produce or create." It's never been like that for me. The methods always go hand in hand. Regarding materials, I'm fascinated by second-hand goods. Whenever I visit another city, I usually go to second-hand bookstores or flea markets, not museums. For me, these places are not only more historical but also more political and laden with memory.

Dito-Mira: Thank you for having us. We've enjoyed discussing this production process with you. This year, or more precisely, in the coming year, Cemeti's focus is on the distribution of knowledge and collaborative learning processes. For us, it's important to have conversations like this so that knowledge about artistic research methods like yours, which you described

as folded, can be understood by many, including younger generations.