





Nindityo Adipurnomo

Exploring Vacuum 2003
Cemeti's 15 TH Anniversary

Cemeti Gallery opened at the end of January, fifteen years ago.
A speech by Fajar Sidik, a legend of Indonesian abstract painting, marked the modest initiation ceremony at Ngadisuryan St. 7A, Yogyakarta.

Since its inception through to the present day, the Gallery that later changed its name to Cemeti Art House continues to evaluate and explore possible curatorial patterns of exhibitions as local and international art events. Celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of this art enclave, Cemeti Art House is running two art events focused on the specificity of curatorial concepts, from September through December 2003.

The following essay is an overview and exploration of ideas and curatorial concepts selected for the 15th anniversary of Cemeti.

Curatorial: System and Strategy

Curatorship was originally a system which eventually shifted to become a strategic option. As a system it defined the mechanisms for the exchange of ideas, concepts, emotions, experiences, and so on. The execution of such an exchange, which is often emphasised as a "process", reflects the strategies fundamental and supportive to it. It becomes a small facet, namely an event within the entire spatial and temporal structure in the totality of a given historical context.

One of the most significant activities in a curatorial strategy is selection. I am referring here to "selection" in the general sense of choosing works and artists based on numerous considerations related to political, social and cultural phenomena, with a particular art public in mind. Predictions and intense dialogical assessment during and after the exhibition-as-event almost necessarily define the strategy. Observation of how much of the public in attendance, the awareness of the public "class" and its accessibility, the advocacy messages, and the implied empowerment are among the elements of a selection set-up that defines a curatorial system. Yet, somehow, selection that should have been a major and important part, as well as a prominent feature in the entire curatorial mechanism, tends to be perceived in a highly partial manner. A striking thing about such fragmentary observations is that the presence of "star" artists and their works are rendered the yardsticks and foci of interest concerning curatorial weight. That way, as a "totality of process" the curatorial work is reduced so that it loses its sense of a configuration. At this point, such observation is usually kept up to construct the idea of a sort of an instant curatorial system regarded to be safe and appropriate.

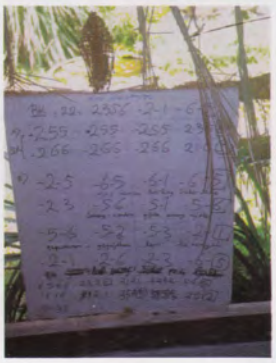
Not surprisingly, such viewpoint tends to constantly impede "growth", "regeneration", and so on; some suspect it of narrowing the meaning of the very terms because what are inferred to as the highly qualified products of this system will usually be adopted as the basic reference for the next system (an example of this is the phenomenon of "catalogue-based curatorial"). The linear structure of such thinking ignores the usefulness of the cumulative energy to which the rolling snowball metaphor refers. That is why "selection", which often represents the spearhead of the moral responsibility within the system, will frequently become the easy target to hound and denounce. Quite naturally, however reliable the adopted strategy is, it will always still leave various issues among those "not selected" and those "selected"; and there may be, perhaps, some problems in the relationship between the two "sides" as well.

Recently, an overview of art discourses that emerge from the practice of inquiring/analysing/reading and theorising about such a curatorial system often points out certain undesirable interests. In the name of openness, the search for locality, equality, democracy, and the like, the operational concept of such a systemic curatorial framework will be altered. From a system, it has now evolved into an alternative strategy. A system can employ different, plural strategies, but a strategy does not always refer to just one single system. Such a shift in perception concerning curatorial tasks opens up possibilities for different approaches with various background interests, each responsible for their own targets. Various approaches that are now merging to provide a multidisciplinary fusion include sociological and anthropological ones. These two models of approach foster the potency of enriching the visual art discourse while seizing the opportunity to fulfil the lack in art-supportive academic disciplines in Indonesia.

Artists' nepotism, curators and multi-professionals

Among the various effects of the shift from "curatorial-as-system" to "curatorial-as-strategy" is the emergence of "artist-run space" with its "alternate art space" in Indonesia. This is just to give a small example from among the rich phenomena of alternative approaches already mentioned.







The range of actions and ideas within these "alternative art spaces", which are usually conceptualised by multi-professionals (at the same time they become the characteristics of these alternative movements), has enabled them to approach/directly run experiments, induce processes, and conduct research concerning art as a process in the context of its community, in order to develop networking to preserve the support community while preparing the habitat for its propagation.

These small-scaled, local activities and ideas are far from any intention to set up new power centres. In addition to this, they do not always render themselves anti-hegemonic and anti-establishment. This attitude has enabled them to win their alternative positions amongst centres of authority and guardians of aesthetic values, such as museums, art academies, the mass media, government and non-government art institutions, galleries, sponsors, collectors, through "art dealers" and market systems. Another characteristically strong point of such small groups is their relatively reliable capacity for survival. The strategies that they employ enable them to invalidate themselves after a short time only to be reborn with some new, updated strategies. In Java there are/were several examples of them, including *Ruang Rupa* in Jakarta, *Galeri Barak* in Bandung, *Galeri Gelaran*, *Galeri Kedai Kebun*, and *Galeri Benda* in Yogyakarta. In several developed countries (where "the state" is an effective concept of protection over citizens' rights and obligations), like South Korea, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, etc., art is part of the "political will" and ideology of a given government; the ambience of resistance towards the establishment seems to have become a new hegemony that necessarily contributes to invested concepts of art education for the citizens. The Fourth Gwangju Biennial is a phenomenal example of an international forum. The accurate mapping of the problems in art discourse world-wide has encouraged curators, art workers, activists, and artists to merge themselves into the process of dealing with the problems in creative and innovative ways rather than "offering the promise of moral solutions".

Does a "research attitude" remain a relevant curatorial model?

In experimenting with ideas, such as working on a curatorial model for a commercial gallery, for instance, I'd like to ask you to join me in reviewing the search for a curatorial system for Cemeti Gallery. In the first place, we have to reconstruct the sort of "art world" in Yogyakarta with its surrounding socio-political conditions at the time the Gallery was initiated (1988) until the dethroning of the ruling regime (1998). The next issue to bear well in mind is that a large part of the review of the basic ideas behind this experiment is based on our practice of running a gallery; theoretical support is considerably lacking here. However, the readers may be inspired to learn something just from the inherent weaknesses of this experiment.

The non-military regime, which was supported by the military and gave it liberal space to take part in the administration, admittedly succeeded in centralising the governing of the country in Java, or Jakarta more specifically, in controlling national affairs. Art was not exempted from the exercise of this political power; as an essential part of the interpretive description of culture, it was rendered an effective tool to disseminate to the masses the ideology of unification and one-dimensional unity. Art celebrated by the ruling power was an art that glorified the myths of historical figures, forerunners to the nation, with all their abstract greatness. (Visual) art did not move far from being an instrument for worshipping the ruling hierarchy and preserving co-opted aesthetics. The homogenising of artistic articulation and visual art idioms has been hypnotising the cultural sense and alertness in its entirety. During such "stable" yet precarious times, the Gallery's curatorial outline was oriented toward exploring "provocative" artistic idioms and ideas. The criticising undertone regarding the existent "art world", which eventually gave way to a "critical stance toward the politics of power and governmental control", was featured by turns in solo exhibitions at Cemeti Gallery.

The year 1999 bears the mark of a new exhibition space architecture. Having received the influx of constructive ideas for improving its curatorial pattern, Cemeti Gallery felt the need to draw a new map! Its policy had to define some new focus. New curatorial ideas and concepts had to be developed out of their recycled forebearers. An active and participatory sense of community had become a new theme to compliment the old policy. The fresh "exoticism" took form in the modules of collaborative and interactive organising of "art events" launched by





Cemeti Art House that included, among others, **Komunitas Bunyi** 1999 (Community of Sounds, Haryo 'Yose' Suyoro); **Tektonika arsitektur YB Mangunwijaya** 1999 (Architectural Tectonics of YB Mangunwijaya, Eko Prawoto); **Ruang Etsa dan Sepakbola** 2000 (Etching Space and Soccer, Tisna Sanjaya); **The burning away of all illusion and desire** 2001 (Alex Dea); **Exploring Vacuum** 2003, and an outdoor event, **Art of Bamboo**, 2002. Cogently similar modules held for those events in certain respects. The first thing to note was that artists no longer busied themselves exclusively with artistic explorations and the search for new idioms; they went further to absorb and articulate the reflective and unique awareness of the respective art community they trusted to work together. The nepotism practised amongst artists and curators, which involved "individual struggles", became significant. Moreover, the interconnection between artists' multi-professions worked like a catalyst in these projects. This reality, which is not altogether new, helps to foster the confidence of each community in its own prospective survival by means of productive confrontational actions *vis- à-vis* other communities. Artists retain the actualisation, processing and exploration of their own individualities while simultaneously being the immediate reflections of the identities of their communities.

In the present curatorial framework, the art project "Exploring Vacuum" 2003 presents twenty multi-profession artists selected from numerous artists presenting their contemporary ideas. Most of them originate from various parts of Indonesia, but have decided to live and work in Java. From our very limited observation, we come to render them as the assumed product of a "golden triangle" fusion of professional disciplines: architects, lecturers, art networkers, curators, graphic designers, and researchers are amongst the target group of this curatorial design. The starting points and products of their explorations in visual idioms are not to be arbitrarily interpreted in separation from the distinctive intuitions which rest on a particular profession or discipline. Another interesting point to learn is how "the vocation" or "strength of mind" with regard to multi-professions has presumably shaped artistic stances. Still another point is how such a professional situation has given rise to artists' strategies for survival in coping with social contacts with different communities as the cultural consequence of their multi-professions. In effect, appreciating their art works means celebrating daily events; it is like a golden triangle snapshot of contemporary life which is imbued with its own histories.

This essay has been published in KOMPAS, November 23, 2003

Nindityo Adipurnomo

Nindityo Adipurnomo, "Kuratorial: Sistem dan Strategi"
15 Years Cemeti Art House
Exploring Vacuum, 2000
eds. Saut Situmorang, Elly Kent, Mella Jaarsma & Nindityo AP
Cogyakarta: Cemeti Art House)
hlm. 198–203