

# The Search for Identity in the Contemporary Artworks of Heri Dono

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## Abstract

Heri Dono was one of the first Asian artists to enter the Asian and Asia-Pacific forums in the 1990s. Upon the question of “How are Heri Dono’s thoughts and works showing an indication of the search for identity?”, this research applies qualitative method with inductive analysis. Through approaches of aesthetics discipline and semiotics, this research traces a new indication in the search for self-identity—one that had abandoned the awareness of an identity based on Western modern views as well as nationalist identities. Bringing tradition and ethnicity into artwork is the mainstream of Indonesia’s art development during the 1970s and 1980s to discover Indonesia’s art identity. Tradition and ethnicity in Heri Dono’s concept, however, is vastly different. He did not spontaneously decide to highlight ethnic culture and tradition based on this perception. In summary, this research proves that Heri Dono’s works not only showed influences from ethnic tradition, but he himself had consciously highlighted tradition and ethnicity as a fundamental concept in his creative work. His works clearly showed signs of ethnic tradition and the expressions that highlight the everyday life of the underclass.

**Keywords:** Identity, Contemporary art, Heri Dono, Tradition, Ethnicity

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s Asian contemporary art, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, has grown exponentially due to mushrooming of regional biennials and triennials, the building of new contemporary art museums and the international recognition and success of Asian artists. The sheer number of Asian cities hosting periodic exhibitions—which includes Jakarta, Taipei, Yokohama, Pusan, Gwangju, Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Fukuoka and Singapore—is striking. However, the most influential of these exhibitions have been the Asia-Pacific Triennial or APT (begun 1993) at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, the Asian Art Shows, and later the Fukuoka Triennial (begun 1999) at the Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan. The Shanghai Biennial (begun 1996) in China and the Gwangju Biennale (begun 1995) in Korea played an important role in the advancement and dissemination of contemporary art in their respective countries. The frequency of interaction in the regional art world intensified considerably. The 1990s saw a leap in the exposure of Indonesian artists and artworks abroad.

Looking at the position of Asian or Asia-Pacific forums within the development of contemporary art, we cannot deny that these two forums serve as an entryway for Asia-Pacific artists to enter the contemporary art forum. Indonesian artists are no exceptions. At the exhibitions in Japan and Australia, works demonstrating strong influences of ethnic tradition emerged to the forefront. Amongst them were works by Heri Dono. Heri Dono was one of the first Asian artists to enter the Asian and Asia-Pacific forums in the 1990s, and one of those artists who manage not only to stay in these regional forums, but also in the world forum.

Heri Dono is unquestionably one of Indonesia’s best known contemporary artists. Since 1990s his international profile has increased through a series of exhibitions and artist in residences around the world. Heri Dono is perhaps best known through his installations which are heavily influenced by, and the result of experimenting with, the most popular Javanese folk theatre: wayang. References to wayang are also integral to his paintings: from out of wild deformations and free fantasies emerge characters from the traditional wayang stories which are mixed together with his profound knowledge of children’s cartoons, animation films and comics. The resulting canvases are populated by astonishing characters and strange juxtapositions, the fantastic and absurd joined by the everyday to create new and vibrant stories in which the artist will insert his own critical remarks on socio-political issues both in Indonesia and abroad.

## 2. Issues of Identity in Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia

The art development in Japan and Australia was not too distanced from the art development in the West. But on the other hand, their geographical condition in the middle of Asia-Pacific region allowed both Japan and Australia to take a closer look at current art praxis and development in the Asia-Pacific region; it also allowed them to realize that art-making in this development had not been based on ethnic tradition. They saw that it was not impossible to foster contemporary art outside of the Western world.

The New Art from Southeast Asia exhibition, organized by Japan Foundation in 1992, was curated by four of Japan's most prominent curators —Masahiro Ushiroshoji, Arata Tani, Hideki Nakamura, and Yoko Sakonaka. The exhibition actually served as an important landmark that must be closely considered when trying to understand contemporary art in Asia. The curatorial framework clearly showed an attempt to identify contemporary art in Asia at the beginning of the 1990s. Based on the survey that he conducted in Southeast Asia, Hideki Nakamura found signs of change in the works created by Southeast Asian artists from the '80s Generation. This change showed a new indication in the search for self-identity—one that had abandoned the awareness of an identity based on Western modern views as well as nationalist identities. The search for self-identity showed a defense of ethnic tradition in societal living (folk art) and in the everyday lives of the underclass (Nakamura, 1992).

Much of the debate about identity in recent decades has been about personal identity, but identity generally has also attracted attention in various fields of study, such as in social sciences, psychology, philosophy, etc. Psychologists most commonly use the term "identity" to describe personal identity, or the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. Meanwhile, sociologists often use the term to describe social identity, or the collection of group memberships that define the individual. However, these uses are not proprietary, and each discipline may use either concept and each discipline may combine both concepts when considering a person's identity. A psychological identity relates to self-image (a person's mental model of him or herself), self-esteem, and individuality. In cognitive psychology, the term "identity" refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self (Leary & Tangney, 2003: 3). Michel Foucault view identity as a process of "becoming", as a chain of continuous change, as a historical range, formed by "disconnect" chains rather than of historical continuity chains. Identity will transform and change constantly with the change itself. As Hall said, rather than fixated on a past that is essentialist and binding, "... (identity) becomes the subject of 'historic play', culture, and power continuously" (Hall, 1990: 223, 225). Identity is a term used to describe the various ways we are "positioned" and simultaneously we are actively positioning ourselves in the narratives of history (Ibid : 225).

"Authentic identity" is what actually sought by Postmodernism. This identity is not dependent on a certain system of authority, "big ideology" or "Meta Narrative". Authentic identity is built through a criticism against a system of symbolic meanings and cultural interpretations that are repressive, centralized, unfair and arbitrary. This trend has rising a new understanding of identity, that, "... people look at themselves, their life, and especially their identity as something that can be modified, manipulated, and transformed."(Marx, 1980: 168). Contemporary art in Indonesia clearly displaying multicultural or multiethnic, as well as personal or self-identity.

## 3. Research Methodology

This research attempts to explore "How are Heri Dono's thoughts and works showing an indication of the search for identity?". To answer the research question, used qualitative research method with inductive analysis. Through approaches of aesthetics and semiotics, this research traces a new indication in the search for self-identity in Heri Dono's works.

In the era of global information and communication, the science of signs, better known as semiotics or semiology, becomes the key knowledge system in various fields of study, such as cultural studies, social studies, media and film studies including the field of art. However semiotics is not actually a new field; it had already been discussed since the era of the Greek philosophers (the word semiotics originates from Greek, semeion which means sign) before Ferdinand de Saussure revived it at the beginning of the 20th century. Semiotics tends to regard various social discourses as language phenomena. Based on semiotic approaches, if all social practices can be seen as language phenomena, then they can all also be seen as signs.

In structural semiotics, Saussure pays attention to the structure of elements which form language, not to the historical influences (change) that impact on language. For Saussure signs are the unification of two fields which are inseparable: sound image and concept. Roland Barthes then develops this into signifiers (forms) and signified (concepts or meanings). This unification is regarded as stable.

Differing from Saussure's perspective, from the post-structuralist perspective, semiotics no longer pays attention to systems of signs, but rather to forms of subjects and their roles in changing language. For post-structuralist thinkers, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is no longer stable and based on convention, but open to the free games of the signifier. Signs are produced not to impart social messages and conventions, but rather are based on the passions and pleasures of the game of signals (Piliang, 2004: 313-318). In the world of playing with signs this is articulated through various aesthetic languages: parody, pastiche, camp and kitsch.

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation or intertextuality – is usually regarded as central to post-modernism, both by its critics and its defenders. Through this process of placement and derision, parody signals how representation at this point originates in the past, and what the consequences of ideology are, both through continuity and difference. In Hutcheon's opinion, parody deconstructs doctrine; it shakes up all accepted certainties and ideologies. Hutcheon sees resistance in post-modern art as an absolute solution for the contradictions within society; she respects post-modernist willingness to question all ideological positions, all claims to the ultimate truth (Hutcheon, 1989: 95). According to Hutcheon, one of the main characteristics which distinguished post-modernism from modernism is the fact that it "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement." (Ibid: 1). One of the ways to create double meaning or to challenge the whole of reality is to use parody: quoting convention in order to mock.

#### 4. The Search for Identity in The Contemporary Artworks of Heri Dono

In a career spanning more than three decades, Heri Dono has consistently displayed aesthetic idiolects – according to Umberto Eco, aesthetic idiolects can be understood as the personal style of an artist – that gained him a position as a contemporary Indonesian artist involved in a variety of important international exhibition activities, such as biennials, triennials and international activities. Up to 2006 he was included in eight major international art events; noted as the most regularly featured artist (Ingham, 2007: 2)



Figure 1. Heri Dono

(Source: The artist's documentation)

Heri Dono consciously decided that he did not want to be trapped in modern art, instead appreciating plurality and celebrating difference. This attitude pushed him to seek concepts outside the West and to study tradition; not to problematize the dichotomy between West and East, nor for a spirit of challenge or confrontation, but more an effort to contribute and to respect difference. In Heri Dono's opinion, the hegemony of the West need not always be seen as a conflict. Rather than adopting the position of binary opposition as generally taken by modernists when addressing difference, Heri Dono in fact sees difference as an opportunity to explore many opportunities. This way of thinking might remind us of the belief in a dualism of existence long held by Indonesian peoples. He positions himself as the third element, as a medium between dualistic oppositions; neither object nor subject; neither modern nor traditional; neither West nor East. In adopting this attitude he is neither merely rejecting nor accepting, but trying to re-create local variations of modern life to produce new forms. He questions modern

art's celebration of logic, order and knowledge through celebrating irrationality, "play", parody and an enthusiasm for opening the space for interpretation of his work as wide as possible. In his work, as he acknowledges, parody becomes the dominant aesthetic language. For him, art is a "language" or a "communication tool" between human beings.

Bringing tradition and ethnicity into artwork is the mainstream of Indonesia's art development, often regarded as the development of "Indonesia's modern art". It was already visible in the 1950s, and it became stronger during the 1970s and 1980s. This tendency persists even today. It aims to discover Indonesia's art identity, an attempt that has been influenced by the nationalistic heroism of the then ruling militaristic government. Tradition and ethnicity in Heri Dono's concept, however, is vastly different. He even dismissed this mainstream practice as a deliberate and dishonest attempt. There was a long process in the development of his works prior to his decision to look at tradition and ethnicity.

In 1987 Heri Dono dropped out from Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Yogyakarta, and then for around two years he learned from the senior wayang figure Sukasman, who had developed and explored "wayang ukur" since 1970. Wayang ukur utilised traditional forms and stage effects to present stories about heroes, loyalty and respect, along with human rights and power-sharing. Heri Dono's interest in wayang was not actually a new thing. In an interview he stated that his mother played an important role in introducing him to the stories of the wayang. From her, he became very familiar with world of wayang. Later, he saw the connection between the visual aspects of wayang kulit and the cartoon and comics that became his passion. In his opinion, wayang and cartoons share the same principle; figures that are actually inanimate but that can be manipulated and animated. His encounter with Sukasman sparked explorations in the visual manifestations of wayang. In an interview with Hendro Wiyanto, Heri Dono once said that his explorations in wayang are not intended to preserve wayang in its original form, or in order to reduce the traditional forms, but in order to recreate new signs (Wiyanto, 2004: 61).

Heri Dono's work "Wayang Legenda" took up the Batak folk tale. The work is comprised of 60 figures that were exhibited in Jakarta (June 1988) and Seni Sono Art Gallery, Yogyakarta (September 1988). The aesthetic influence of Picasso is palpable in the wayang characters in this work. In the process of making "Wayang Legend" a number of artists who are friends of Heri Dono were involved. It is neither a painting nor a sculpture. However, it is not really designed as an installation piece because it is meant to be a setting for shadow puppet shows, complete with a screen and the banana trunk used to arrange the puppets. Heri Dono's expressions are reflected in the two rows of puppets presented in that work. None of those puppets (made from cardboard instead of the traditional leather) is similar to the puppets from Javanese classical tradition. All of Heri Dono's caricatural puppets carry messages that appear through symbols. During a performance, these symbols would act as a way to convey cynicisms that rose out of the narration about nonsensical or illogical reality.



Figure 2. Heri Dono, "Wayang Legenda" (1988)

(Source: Art:1 New Museum)

Another work, "Hoping to Hear from You Soon" (1992) is a reconstruction of a *warung* (food tent). These food tents usually appear at night—to be taken down during the day only to be put up again at night. The *warungs*, that usually sell food or coffee, are usually erected on shop-front pavements in busy/crowded areas, and the majority of them are run by the underclass. In this work, Heri Dono has modified the pictures and texts that

usually appear on the fabric barrier to inform patrons of the menu. Heri Dono would host many of his guests, either from Indonesia or abroad, in *warungs* like these. The title of this work also hints at how the *warung* is often a witness to his parting with a foreign friend, perhaps to meet again someday.



Figure 3. Heri Dono, “Hoping to Hear from You Soon” (1992)  
(Source: documentation of the artist)

Heri Dono's work, “Gamelan Goro-Goro” (2001), was presented as a simple gamelan (a set of traditional classical Javanese instruments/orchestra ensemble) that was controlled by electronic devices—also simple in their configuration—allowing it to produce sound independent of any human involvement. For him, objects are also subjects, and vice versa; an impossibility in Western thought. He concedes his tendency to use recycled material (especially electronic items or components) is a form of respect and an attempt to make new souls.

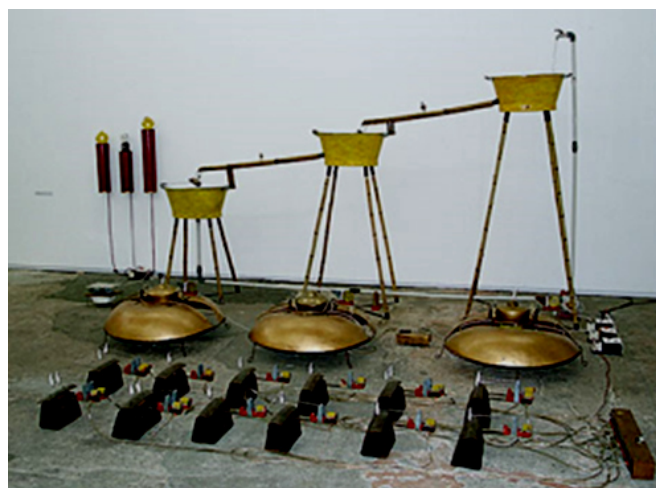


Figure 4. Heri Dono, “Gamelan Goro-Goro” (2001)  
(Source: Researcher's documentation)

Human existence has become the main focus of Heri Dono's work, although it often appears in an unrealistic way that tends to be distortive and hybridised; in the shape of giants, well-known figures, superheroes and mythological figures like Semar. These figures are not drawn anatomically or proportionally correct; in the majority of Heri Dono's paintings the head is much larger than the body, indicating that the head is valued more highly than the body. Symbolically, the head is an important centre in the location of the "self", the primary part in the hierarchy of the body.

Meanwhile, the face is the most expressive part of the body, and the most important part of communication; hence a *wayang* character is represented, among other things, by the expression of its face. The eyes and mouth have become the part of the face that is most often explored by Heri Dono. Particularly in the paintings of Heri

Dono, the eye can be placed freely anywhere on the face, and the number of eyes is also free; it could be one, two or six. Meanwhile the mouth is often drawn complete with teeth, considered to be indexical of childishness and verbal aggression. A protruding tongue appears often also, indicating the intensification of verbal concentration on a primitive level. This also seems to be connected to the expression from the Javanese aphorism '*Ajining diri ono ing lathi*', which translates approximately to 'a person's value is in their expression and their words'. This saying is intended to encourage people to guard their every word and always speak correctly.



Figure 5. Heri Dono, "Life in the Wayang Land III" (1990)  
(Source: Researcher's documentation)

The mouth and lips in Heri Dono's work immediately reminds us of the figures that appear in Picasso's cubist paintings; meanwhile the figure that appears distorted and awkward reminds of the Miro's surrealism. On the other hand, the flat forms directly reference shadow puppets. Generally in Heri Dono's work – both his two and three-dimensional works – there is an intertextual process that occurs in which one visual text (in Heri Dono's work) refers to another visual text (the works of Picasso, Miro, or shadow puppets). An interaction or dialogical intersection between one text and another in the historical scope occurs; the unification of the past and the present. Intersections like these produce double codes that are characterised by hybridity and eclecticism.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetic idiolects that can be found in Heri Dono's two dimensional works are the lack of perspective in almost all of his works. Objects are allowed to float as if there is no gravity in a flat field, in the manner of a shadow puppet screen. The painting field is filled with a variety of images. The figures in his paintings tend to be positioned face to face, similar to the shadow puppet scenes. Meanwhile in his three dimensional work, Heri Dono's tendency to bring together various elements in his work is evident, including voices and movements that result from mechanical processes. Voice and movement are Heri Dono's effort to create new spirits, in order to emphasise his understanding that all objects in nature have a spirit.

Diversity in Heri Dono's work provides a chance to criticize socio-political situations in Indonesia through parody and metaphor. For him, paintings are a performance stage or a wayang screen, where various characters are exhibited in a confined, limited space. These characters seem at once humorous and frightening, containing the phenomena of absurdity and intertextuality, forms a recycling signs, parody, and double coding. Heri Dono's works not only showed influences from ethnic tradition, but he himself had consciously highlighted tradition and ethnicity as a fundamental concept in his creative work. His works can be regarded as works that show the everyday reality, as works that use vernacular elements as media of expression, or as works that ask questions about the ordinary people who are considered as the underclass in Indonesia. In the same way as wayang stories

and cartoons, through distortion and elaboration, Heri Dono shows the true reality of Indonesian society.

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## Irma Damajanti

Irma Damajanti was born in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, in 1970. She received the BA. degree in graphic design from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia, in 1995, and the MA degree in visual art from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia in 1999. In 1995, she joined the Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, as a Lecturer. Her current research interests include artistic creativity, psychology of art, and visual semiotics.

## Setiawan Sabana (M'81–SM'92–F'05)

Setiawan Sabana became a Member (M) of the Association of Asian International Art Exhibition (AIAE) in 1981, a senior Member (SM) in 1992, and Fellow (F) in 2005. Setiawan Sabana was born in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, in 1951. He received the BA degree in print making from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia, in 1977, the MA degree in visual art from Northern Illinois University, USA (MFA) in 1982, and Ph.D. degree in visual art from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia (Doctor) in 2002. In 1979, he joined the Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, as a Lecturer, and in 2007 become a Professor. His current research interests include visual arts, spirituality in arts, traditional packaging designs and creative industries. Prof. Sabana is a Chairman of National Committee of Asian International Art Exhibition (AIAE) Indonesia.

## Yasraf Amir Piliang

Yasraf Amir Piliang was born in Maninjau, Agam, West Sumatera, Indonesia, in 1956. He received the BA degree in Industrial Design from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia, in 1984, the MA degree in design and visual culture from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London in 1993, and Ph.D. degree in design and visual culture from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia (Doctor) in 2007. In 1986, he joined the Department of Design, Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, as a Lecturer, and in 2015 become a Professor. His current research interests include visual culture, contemporary culture, semiotics and philosophy.