

Wit(h)nessing the Witness: Narratives and Visuality in Dadang Christanto's Recent Works.

Dadang Christanto was born in Tegal, Central Java, in 1957. He received his training between 1980-1986 in the Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (Indonesian Art Academy, ASRI), now Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Art Institute, ISI). As a student, Christanto was part of a broader group of young artists whose interests went beyond the traditional art academy. In the 1990s, he became one of Indonesia's most prominent artists, regularly representing Indonesia in influential overseas exhibitions such as 'Traditions/Tensions' (New York, 1996) and the Asia Pacific Triennale (Brisbane, 1996, 1999).

In 1999, Christanto moved to Darwin, Australia, where he was appointed as a Lecturer in Southeast Asian Contemporary Art at the Charles Darwin University. The move to Australia shifted his artistic focus to painting and drawing while he also continued to make large-scale installations and performance works. As he explained later, the move to Australia allowed him not only to feel free from the stigma of being an ethnic Chinese but also to rethink his personal association with 1965.¹

**

The year 2015 marked the fiftieth year since the anti-communist killings of 1965-66 in Indonesia. The scale and ferocity of the mass violence that occurred in the aftermath of an abortive coup attempt on the night of 30th September 1965 was unprecedented in Indonesia's modern history. Scholars have estimated that within just six months, up to half a million people lost their lives through state-sanctioned mass violence across Indonesia with a large concentration of the killings on the islands of Java and Bali. The victims, which were of diverse class, ethnic and gender background, were alleged and real members or sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party and its organizational affiliations.²

The artist reflects that since 2015, he wanted to bring the attention back to the individuals, namely the victims and survivors of 1965-66³. From 2017 onwards, the artist shifted the focus of his works from his narrative of 1965-66 to the stories of the victims and survivors. The

¹ There is already a vast body of scholarship on Chinese-Indonesians that discussed this issue. See for example Charles Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis*, Oxford University Press, 1983; Charles Coppel, *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia*, Singapore Association of Asian Studies, 2002; Leo Suryadinata, *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008; Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996-1999*, ASAA SEA Press, 2006; SM Sai and CY Hoon (eds.), *Chinese Indonesians Reassessed: History, Religion and Belonging*, Routledge, New York, 2012.

² Caroline Turner and Glen Barclay, "Dadang Christanto: Wounds in Our Heart" in *Dadang Christanto: Wounds in Our Heart*, C. Turner and N. Sever (eds.), exhibition catalogue, ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 2010, pp. 13. The literature on the topic Indonesia's anti-communist mass killings is extensive. See among others Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990; John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006; Kate McGregor, *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia 1965-68*, NUS Press, Singapore, 2012; Annie Pohlman, *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965-66*, Routledge, New York, London, 2016; Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia*, NUS Press, Singapore, 2018.

³ Personal communication with the artist, Melbourne, 28 May 2018.

centrality of stories and narratives is important to position the role of visual artists in engaging with the mass killings of 1965-66.

Firstly, with the relative absence of visual materials in the immediate aftermath of the October 1st event, Indonesians had to rely on radio transmissions which were controlled by the army to receive their information about what was happening in the country. As a result, rumors and unconfirmed stories gripped the nation to which the military took full advantage by whipping anti-communist hatred and propaganda.

Secondly, the on-going stigmatization of communism was/is not only applicable to victims and political prisoners but also extended to their family members even to the present day. Many young Indonesians found out about their parents/grandparents' link to the 1965-66 events through stories that were shared quietly within the close family circle.

The lack of visual material on one of the worst atrocities in Indonesia's modern history is then reflected in how most Indonesian artists place oral histories and testimonies in the heart of their works. They do so through several approaches, from reimagining the events based on oral history research, creating (counter)memorial works, to drawing deep into their family and personal history. While Christanto's body of work on 1965-66 in the past two decades have come from the latter, his recent works reflected a new form of engagement with oral research.

Inspired by a story from his acquaintance in his hometown about a roving photographer that took photographs of alleged communists before they were interrogated, the artist took on this story and developed it into the several series of works in the exhibition. The artist further reflects that over the decades, he collects stories from survivors, witnesses, family members and also perpetrators of the mass killings to situate his personal history in the bigger course of the events. He also wants to pare down his approach to the subject matter by not only focusing on figures but also by using the most straightforward techniques, which according to the artist means 'going back to painting, back to drawing.'⁴

The exhibition that took its title from the monumental MISSING series is a continuation of the artist's ongoing work on historical trauma and collective memory of 1965-66 in Indonesia. The series MISSING (2018, 90x80cm each, acrylic and charcoal on canvas) is a wall installation of one hundred and ten acrylic and charcoal portraits. In this series, we can also see the continuation of the artist's use of heads to signify victims of human rights violation. However, instead of abstracting the figures as reflected in the series Head (2015-2018, 81x50x52cm each, copper, aluminium and fiberglass) in this exhibition, Christanto decided to give back a sense of individuality to the figures.

Each portrait was a depiction of an individual in the aftermath of violent acts perpetrated against them. The artist drew the bruised, battered and bloody faces and presented them uncompromisingly to the viewers; some of the individuals could hardly open their swollen eyes, some still retained the traces of terror in their expressions, while others stared defiantly back. The rough strokes of charcoal dominated the drawings is combined with the untreated

⁴ Personal communication with the artist, Jakarta, 04 August 2018.

canvas that the artist deliberately used – so it resembled burlap that was often used to cover the victim’s head during the mass violence of 1965-66 – further emphasized the rawness of the images.

In the first instance, the portraits resemble the (in)famous S-21/Tuol Sleng photographs. The S-21 photographs were identity photographs taken by an official photographer of the Khmer Rouge to document every prisoner before they were killed in the camp. In contrast to the photographs, the portraits in *MISSING* are the depiction of individuals after the violence had occurred to them. The portraits become the visual manifestation of the silenced narratives of the victims of violence. Moreover, they not only speak of the victims but they also speak out of a particular memory of the body that sustains sensation – in this regard, of pain and suffering.

As Christanto has informed us, the portraits in *MISSING* are of imagined individuals; while the survivors of 1965-66 continue to live their day-to-day existence, the portraits are the artist’s creative response to the narratives of 1965-66. The distinction matters because *MISSING*, together with the more visceral *Ciduk, Siksa, Bunuh, Buang* (*Grab, Torture, Kill, Throw Away*, 2018, 162x127cm and 170x145cm each, acrylic and charcoal on canvas) series, are artworks that function somewhat differently from legal documents that victims of human right violations use to redress the injustices. While the subject matter in Christanto’s works is indeed partially based from oral narratives of the victims and survivors of the mass killings, but artworks through its capacity as art have a different kind of role to enhance our understanding of the historical trauma.

They do so among other things by triggering affective responses through direct engagement with the sensation that registered from the artworks and the exhibition space. The powerful images that emerged from the artist’s expressive strokes in the series trigger an intense sensation as a mean to evoke empathy from the viewer. The representation of pain is amplified by the sheer number of the individuals that loom over the viewer on the exhibition space, together with the three large heads that seem to stand guard for them.

At the same time, as viewers immerse themselves in the exhibition space, they may also experience a sense of “empathic unsettlement”, a term used by Dominick LaCapra to explain an aesthetic experience of simultaneously feeling for another and becoming aware of the distinction between one’s perception and the experience of others.⁵ For most viewers, the pain and suffering of the victims represented in the artworks, were not experienced first hand, these traumas thus remain “owned” and unshareable even after they are communicated, particularly when one takes account of the artist’s creative processes in the making of these works.

Art that deals with trauma then also shows us the limits of sympathy as well as being vulnerable to the effects of crude empathy, a Brechtian term to describe a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other’s experience to the self.⁶ While these works connect

⁵ *Dominic LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2001, pp. 41-42.*

⁶ *Jill Bennett, Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 10.*

the viewers to a sense of common humanity, it also has the potential to alienate those who are not receptive to the artworks' invitation.

Christanto's works have always been firmly on the side of the victims and survivors of human rights violation. As his works appeal to the sense of justice and humanity, in this exhibition, they are also unavoidably, shocking. The shock function, as Brian Massumi argues, 'does not so much reveal the truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry,'⁷ particularly on the issues of 1965-66. What we could consider is how these works function to stimulate our thinking through visual signs and the body, particularly if we contextualize the shock against the effort by the Indonesian state to suppress and silence the victims and survivors' narratives.

As the repercussions of Indonesia's anti-communist killings continue, the decades-long stigmatization and suppression of the truth about 1965-1966 have resulted in a poor public understanding of the event and a slow erasure of the past atrocities in Indonesia's collective memory.

While visual arts have so far largely remained under the radar of censorship, Dadang Christanto is one of the few Indonesian artists whose work draws consistently on memories of 1965-66. In his artworks, Christanto has responded to the suppression of truth and memory in Indonesia by using visual language in the form of painting, performance art, installation, and new media.

Indeed, Christanto is not the only Indonesian artist who has engaged with this sensitive subject matter. Despite the general taboo surrounding the topic, contemporary Indonesian artists have engaged with it through various subtle and, more recently, increasingly open ways. Works and projects by individual artists such as Tintin Wulia, Nadiah Bamadhaj, Dolorosa Sinaga, Setu Legi, Mella Jaarsma, Patriot Mukmin and cultural activist collective Museum Bergerak 1965 produced between 2008-2015 are only some that address the issues of memory and history of 1965-66 in Indonesia since the end of the 'New Order' regime in 1998.

In the 'M I S S I N G' exhibition, rather than feeding the 'New Order' specter of anti-communism that continues to haunt Indonesia's national psyche, the artist chose to 'humanize' the figures which for decades were de-humanized by the state through suppression and erasure. While Christanto decided to focus on the narratives of the victims and survivors of the mass killings, his collaboration with other performers, in fact, opened up the possibilities of how art making could move from representational images into productive ones – especially when such projects also shift from the visual to the multi-sensory.

Nonetheless, the artist's strategy to go 'old school' as he called it, namely to focus on painting and drawing, is effective in addressing the sense of loss and silencing that surround the events of 1965-66 in Indonesia. Perhaps there is no further need for embellishment or euphemism

⁷ Brian Massumi in Bennet, *Empathic Vision*, pp. 11.

in the representation and the narratives. The expressive strokes, combined with the minimal use of colors and untreated canvas give the artist's recent series of works a new kind of focus, a rawness, and urgency to the artist's attempt to give voice to the loss, trauma and silence that victims and survivors experienced in the past five decades.

Christanto, together with other Indonesian artists that have been working on the issues of 1965-66, place the stories and narratives as the primary driver in their works. They work to challenge the official, documented versions of these events by the state. Given that history tends to be written by victors, these artistic practices that drew from oral narratives seek to represent the 'history from below' by standing together with the witnesses of human rights violation.

Essay by Wulan Dirgantoro

Dr. Wulan Dirgantoro is a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of "Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences" (Amsterdam University Press 2017). Her current research project examines the connection between trauma, memory and art making in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.