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WHATEVER HAPPENED IN PRISON DOESN'T STAY IN PRISON

July 20, 2017 by [Leave a comment](#)



WHEN AN ARTIST HAD TO SURVIVE A LIFE IN JAIL, THE RESULT WAS NOTHING BUT AN AESTHETIC OF HUMAN TRACES

Angki Purbandono is an Indonesian artist/photographer who was once arrested for smoking marijuana and sentenced to one year in prison (the court later reduced the sentence to 10 months). During his jail time, he picked out objects from his everyday life (rubber bands/snack bags/sandals) by using a scanner to document them (instead of a camera) before creating the works of art that were later put together into an exhibition called 'Grey Area.' The whole thing sounds pretty cool especially when an artist turns a crisis in life into an opportunity to pursue his artistic interests and a space that not many people have access to into an artistic context. If that were all there was to the story (creating art in prison), it would have many people imagining that they would see the work exploring

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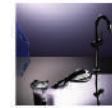
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controversy or a critique of human rights issues from behind bars, but the fact that everybody needs to know here is that the artist didn't want to create this work from prison to begin with and what makes his work cool isn't its controversial subject matter but the fact that 'Grey Area' is able to discuss the life of prisoners without having to invade other people's personal rights and privacy. It's the protection of the rights of the creator as well as other individuals with art being used to pave the way into a new society.

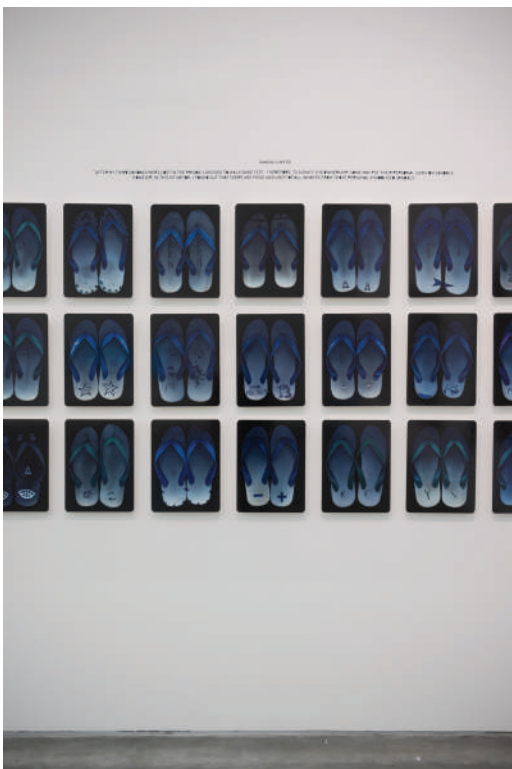


'Grey Area' by Angki Purbandono, photo by Napat Charitbutra



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Ark Fongsmut, the curator, said in the article featured in the exhibition's catalogue that works created for this show reflect different stages of adjustment the artist had to go through, from being an outsider in the beginning to that of finding a stage where he eventually fit in and could fully be a part of the prison community while maintaining his role as an artist. Purbandono's adjustment started with the process in which *Material Ethic* (2013) was materialized. The artist began by aimlessly collecting rubber bands he found left on the floor and empty bags of snacks (which he explained was something he did automatically when he first arrived at the prison). Purbandono later arranged the found objects into patterns that were somewhat similar to tribal patterns before documenting them using a scanner. Once the images were created, they became a magnet that attracted other inmates with opinions and memories ready to be eagerly shared and exchanged. The work earned him acceptance and the interest of other members of the community who had never previously experienced an artist's artistic process firsthand. For *Sandal United* (2013), Purbandono stepped closer and really became a part of the community with a greater power of negotiation in his hands for he was given the privilege of choosing and borrowing personal belongings of other inmates for a certain period of time (the borrowed items were scanned). On the other hand, such process also implied the role and participation of other inmates in the artistic process.



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While not being able to reveal the faces of other prisoners is somewhat of the work's limitation, Purbandono presented the 'existence' of these individuals by using personal items such as sandals to express each inmate's character and individuality. The question is, how can a pair of sandals reflect the identity of its wearer, especially when there's no face, name or ID number presented like other forms of identification? For this particular question, in the normal world outside of the confinement of steel bars, barbed wire, rifles and regulations, finding a person's identity from a sandal he or she wears may be hard to do for the traces of individuality may not be that noticeable. But in the special proximity that is prison, everything and everyone exists under one standard. The adding of small details on the clothes (which are all homogenized) is an expression of ownership and allows the inmates to identify which items belong to them from the large number of identical objects. The images are, in a way, similar to portraits of the faceless prisoners and despite each item not depicting any name or number, identification can still be made effectively.



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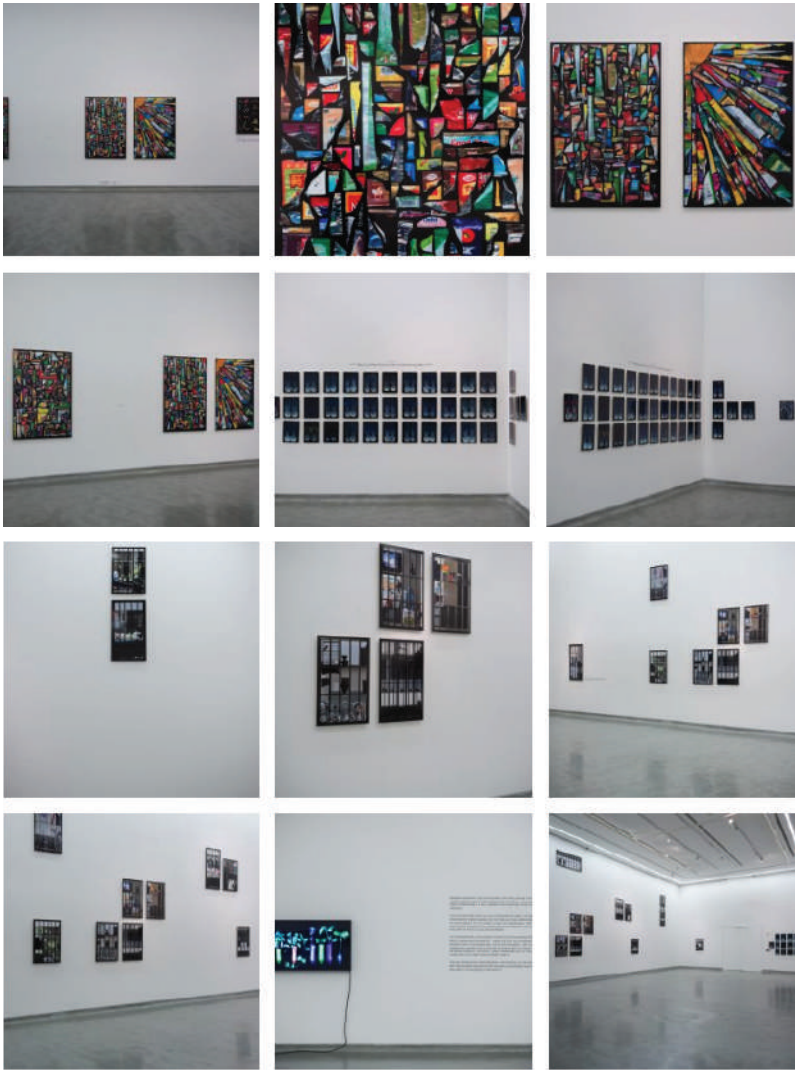
Purbandono finally got his hands on an actual camera (which can be considered the goal of his socialization process) with the support of the warden, Yhoga Aditya Ruswanto, who shared a similar interest in photography and asked the artist to teach him about the basics of photography. Out of the Box (2013) is the result of a short photography course where Purbandono taught his warden about composition and silhouettes with the windows of the prison's cells being used as the backdrops. When these photos were installed, they turned the exhibition space into a cell, interestingly recreating the

experience of looking at the outside world from the state of imprisonment.



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We may count Grey Area as a work of community art for it relies on the participation of 'others' as a significant process in the making, but there are certain elements that differentiate the exhibition from most community-based art. For this particular issue, Fongsmut made an observation that the artist did not create work from the point of view of an observer, but actually became a part of the community. Another interesting distinction is the 'condition' from which the art was created, since the work was not used to initiate any particular situation or stimulate a certain activity, but from 'coincidence' (and unintentionally) it develops, which caused Purbandono's ten-month period in prison to be somewhat more bearable than expected. What Purbandono also succeeds with in 'Grey Area' is finding a balance between conventional aesthetics and explaining of the process in which the work was created. In several cases, community-based art often overlooks the values and aesthetics of visuals and focuses more on the relational aesthetics that take place along the way, consequentially forcing the story on viewers. For Grey Area, the work's relational aesthetics happen naturally for it isn't the goal of Purbandono's work (like it is for other community-based art) but a necessity that eventually leads to the final result. And one mustn't forget that without the help of his cellmates and a warden like Yhoga Aditya Ruswanto, the work wouldn't have been created at all.



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The exhibition 'Grey Area' is being held at Bangkok University Gallery, Klouynamthai Campus, until 26th July 2017.

TEXT: NAPAT CHARITBUTRA

www.angkipu.com