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# Dunia dalam Berita – The World in News at Museum MACAN

*The survey exhibition explores the emergence of contemporary art before and after Indonesia's Reformasi.*



Mella Jaarsma, *I Eat You Eat Me*, 2001–2012, performance in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2001. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist.

Jakarta's Museum MACAN is featuring the work of ten of its most recognised contemporary artists in a major survey exhibition that charts the emergence of the contemporary art movement in Indonesia before and after Reformasi, the country's post-Suharto political reformation started in 1998. The show "Dunia dalam Berita" ("The World in News") takes its title from the name of a popular Indonesian news programme, which has been on the air since 1973. The ten artists in the exhibition explore, examine, reflect and react to the political upheaval leading to and following Reformasi. Talking to ASIA, Museum MACAN Director Aaron Seeto expands:

*"Dunia dalam Berita, which translates as the 'world in news', is the name of a nightly news program that was broadcast on the television station TVRI. This program began broadcasting in 1962 before Reformation. As the only, and official news program of the time, Dunia dalam Berita was an important source of information, and part of the way in which the New Order administration was able to centralize information and control. Watching this nightly program is also an experience that is embedded within the collective memory of most Indonesians up to the 1990s, we used this title, to illustrate both of these facts. The exhibition includes work by 10 prominent Indonesian artists active in the mid-to-late 1990s through to the mid-2000s.*

*This period saw the emergence of very particular artistic and political strategies and tendencies within a younger*

generation of Indonesian artists, that was directly related to the changes in politics and society, leading up to and after Reformasi. We included artists whose artistic and political language is contemporary to their experience of the political and social transformation of Reformasi, and who reflect Indonesia's socio-political transformation, the democratization of information, and how a democratic society was being imagined. The news program, and the title of the exhibition, *Dunia Dalam Berita*, acts as a foil for us to explore artists' critical approaches toward the New Order administration, the ways freedom of expression was controlled, and the impact of freedom of expression on the post-Reformation democratic society."



"Dunia dalam Berita", 1 May – 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN.

The curatorial concept takes an in-depth look at two turning points in Indonesia's recent history: the impact of the transition from the New Order Regime (Suharto's presidency period) to Reformation (or *Reformasi*) by a diverse group of artists between the 1990s and early 2000s, and the influence of globalised popular culture in Indonesia, which emerged from the democratisation of the image and media. The ten leading Indonesian artists featured at MACAN include Agus Suwage (b. 1959), FX Harsono (b. 1949), Heri Dono (b. 1960), I GAK Murniasih (1966-2006), I Nyoman Masriadi (b. 1973), Krisna Murti (b. 1957), Mella Jaarsma (b. 1960), S. Teddy D. (1970-2016), Taring Padi (est. 1998) and Tisna Sanjaya (b. 1958). The press release states about the group of artists:

*"The exhibition includes a generation of artists loosely defined by their engagement with media and information, politics, and new forms of image making. It is marked by two generations of artists: the first possess artistic and political language that is contemporary to their experience of the political and social transformation of Reformasi, and the second are those born slightly later, whose approach to image making, while political, is coded within a more graphic approach."*

In an interview with ASIA, Museum MACAN Director Aaron Seeto expands about the choice of the group of artists for the exhibition:

*"When we were developing the list of artists, we saw two groups of artists - those born in and around the 1950s, whose work can be seen to be indebted to the activities of Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (the Indonesian New Art Movement) from the mid- 1970s, for example FX Harsono, who is one of the founding members of this movement, and a younger generation born in the mid-1960s onwards, who were being influenced by global popular culture, and technology. Of course, these things are related, and the generational distinction in the exhibition, is less important, to how, politically minded artists, were seeking to create new forms that directly responded to politics, society and democracy, which were different to the more traditional activities of the establishment."*





Agus Suwage, *Maka Lahirlah Angkatan '90an*, 2001, oil on canvas 60 x 50 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



S. Teddy D., *Tak Kutuk Dadi Watu* (I Curse You into a Stone), 1999, stone 33 x 37 x 41 cm (14 pieces).  
 "Dunia dalam Berita", 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtest Museum MACAN.

The period, symbolically marked by "Dunia dalam Berita", saw some pivotal transformation in Indonesia, of a political, social and technological nature, and the establishment of two reforms. Undang Undang Dasar 1945 article 28 guaranteed an individual's freedom of communication and expression, while Undang Undang no.40 tahun 1999 regulated freedom of press. The impact of these new legislation saw an increase in the number of private TV stations, radio stations and print media, which had previously been heavily controlled by the state. The public was finally being exposed to global popular culture, with a more diverse programming and entertainment, including popular programmes from overseas. At the same time, the increased amount of information on and access to the internet allowed for a shift from passive viewership to a more active, networked search for information and a more open dialogue and discussion on socio-political issues, going beyond mainstream media.



S. Teddy D., *Viva La Muerte*, 2000-2002, steel fibreglass, zinc, 200 x 100 x 200 cm.”  
 “Dunia dalam Berita”, 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtest Museum MACAN.

In an interview with ASIA, MACAN Director Aaron Set explains how the media and press reforms affected contemporary art production:

*“The opening up of mass media after Reformasi, exposed Indonesia to the influence of global culture. with more television, newspapers, magazines, radio and the emergence of the internet, artists began to adopt ideas and source material from beyond Indonesia, with the ability to readily share it across the country. Popular culture enabled a significant cultural and generational shift and laid the foundation for different ways of thinking about the conceptual nature of art, its form and content and its capacity to comunicate. As well as installation, performance and direct political engagement, the relaxation of media and Indonesia’s participation in globalized culture, gradually saw the domestic availability of media technology like video in Indonesia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We also think that there is a correlation between media reform, freedom of expression and hiw artists begin to articulate issues around identity politics, based on gender, race and religion.”*



Heri Dono, *Bermain Catur*, 1994-1998, acrylic and collage on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



The New Order era began in 1966 with Suharto became President of Indonesia and lasted until 1998, when he resigned from office due to political pressure. The New Order (in Indonesian, *Orde Baru*) is the term coined by President Suharto to characterise his regime, which proposed to improve the declining economy in Indonesia through economic measures that were identified as modernity and progress. In order to maintain their agenda, the New Order administration implemented legislations that regulated the dissemination of information, thus aiming to shape public opinion. Promoting a state propaganda of “national stability”, the New Order managed to guard off dissident political opinions, with tight control over the media, such as limiting news on television to one state-controlled channel, TVRI. This control extended into the cultural sphere, where the administration supported non-political artworks that promoted the period as one of stability and prosperity.



“Dunia dalam Berita”, 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN

However, although the government discouraged socio-politically engaged, experimental art practices, a number of artists still put their work forward and showed it to the public, through initiatives such as the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (GSRBI—Indonesian New Art Movement) and their exhibitions in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. FX Harsono, a founding member of GSRBI, was among the group of artists that started to “directly question and satirize the formation and control, not only of political information, but of the restrictions within popular culture itself, and began to use installation, found objects, photography, and performance to break away from traditional systems of art”, as explained in the curatorial essay for the exhibition catalogue written by Aaron Seeto, Asep Topan, Ady Nugraha and Asri Winata. The 1980s were characterised by a blooming domestic art market for state-sanctioned artistic production, driven by the rapid economic growth and foreign investment. The artists who were establishing their own organisations were not part of this phenomenon, and their experimental, critical voices were excluded from established art spaces.

Aaron Seeto explains to ASIA how there are also was a younger generation of artists going against the current set by the government's vision:

*“It is worth noting that even during the New Order (pre-Reformation), some Indonesian artists have boldly questioned the status quo. In Bandung, younger artists, including Tisna Sanjaya, Arahmaiani, Marintan Sirait, and Isa Perkasa who were part of the Jeprut movement (jeprut is a Sundanese word that literally means ‘snapped’) and Perengkel Jahe, were arranging public performances and happenings that were often informally organized, and provocative, and socially disruptive in an attempt to contest the usage and access to public spaces. While in Yogyakarta, alternative galleries were emerging to provide support and exhibition spaces for younger artists. One of the key venues of the period was Galeri Cemeti which was established in 1988 by two artists Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo.”*



Mella Jaarsma, *(Wo)man of Quality*, 2007, 5 cloaks, leather, wood, digital print on fabric, fabric, embroidery, video, variable dimension. Collection of the artist. "Dunia dalam Berita", installation view, 1 May - 21 July 2019, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN.



Agus Suwage, *Pressure and Pleasure*, 1999, military tent, acrylic, soft-porn Indonesia cinema banner, fabric, metal, 250 x 350 x 500 cm. "Dunia dalam Berita," 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN

In the 1990s, various important, artist-led exhibitions that promoted experimentation took place, such as the 1992 Binal Experimental Arts in Yogyakarta, which saw the city transformed into an urban art festival for nine days with public installations and performances. Another pivotal event, Biennale Seni Rupa Jakarta IX (BSRJ IX), took place in 1993 and featured artists that rejected the conservatism of state-approved art, such as Heri Dono, FX Harsono, Mella Jaarsma and Agus Suwage, whose works are also in the present show at MACAN.

Only a few weeks before the general election in 1997, Galeri Cemeti held "Slot in the Box" featuring 23 artists, which saw the creation of several important artworks included in the exhibition at the museum. One example is FX Harsono's performance *Destruksi*, staged at the Southern Square of Yogyakarta, a state-controlled public space. The artist dressed up as the demon king Alengka, or Rahwana, from the Ramayan epic, who is described both as generous towards his people and greedy for power and control. Harsono was critically commenting on the socio-cultural and political changes taking place at the time.





FX Harsono, *Blank Spot on My TV*, 2003, digital print, 30 x 40 cm (20 panels). Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist



Mella Jaarsma, *(Wo)man of Quality*, 2007, 5 cloaks, leather, wood, digital print on fabric, fabric, embroidery, video, variable dimension. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist.

Also in the MACAN exhibition is Mella Jaarsma's *Pribumi-pribumi* (1998), another performance work that examined "the constraints of political agency amongst Indonesian citizens", as the curators write in the essay, and was part of those artistic practices that sought to subvert the dominant official culture. The piece was created as a reaction to the May 1998 riots provoked by economic instability, food shortages and mass unemployment. The incident witnessed mass violence, demonstrations and civil unrest against ethnically Chinese citizens throughout Indonesia. Performed amongst the food stalls of Malioboro Street in Yogyakarta, the piece aimed to show how – through food, an integral part of Indonesian culture – the violent response to diversity went against the actual lived experience, where difference had always been part of a peaceful co-existence and a characteristic of Indonesian society.



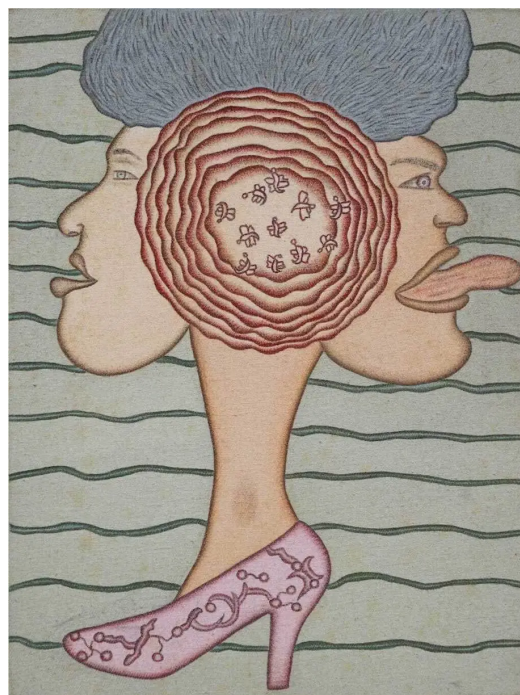
"Dunia dalam Berita", 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN

Just after Reformasi, it became of pivotal importance for artists to explore issues of public space and public engagement. The collective Taring Padi, for instance, hold social and community activism as the basis of their practice since their establishment. Their work takes its form from popular and urban culture, such as easily reproducible posters like the ones in the *Humanitarian Posters Series* of 1999, first created as woodblock prints, and then silkscreen printed more than 5000 times and distributed across different cities in Indonesia.



Tisna Sanjaya, *Visit Indonesian Years*, 1999, oil on fabric, 200 x 400 cm. "Dunia dalam Berita," 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN

Other artists used installation to comment on the situation just after Reformasi. *Pleasure and Pressure* (1999) by Agus Suwage is a military tent displaying handpainted images from adult cinema inside it, while S. Teddy's sculpture *Viva La Muerte* (2000-02) and video *Indonesia ARMY* (2007) also make reference to the military and its fall from power. Also commenting on the socio-political situation just after the end of the New Order, Tisna Sanjaya created an installation in 1999, entitled *Visit Indonesian Years*, which satirically portrayed an ideal family, seen through the recently fallen New Order's perspective of a patriarchal society based on Javanese hierarchical customs combined with Islamic social conventions.



I GAK Murniasih, *Teman dan Tawon*, 1996, acrylic on canvas 40.5 x 30.5 cm. Private collection.



During the Suharto era, women's bodies were subjected to strict control, through a pregnancy control policy, and organisations under the aegis of the government served to resubordinate women. In the MACAN exhibition, two artists explore notions surrounding the body and its representation in Indonesian society, with references to the pre- and post-Reformasi periods: I GAK Murniasih and I Nyoman Masriadi's works are dominated by "the depiction of the body as a representation of personal identity and experience", as the curators write in the essay, commenting on the restrictions and transformations that Indonesia went through.



Heri Dono, *Hoping to Hear from You Soon*, 1992, bamboo, acrylic on canvas, acrylic on cardboard, sound, approx. 375 x 260 cm. "Dunia dalam Berita," 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN

With the mass media reforms, Indonesia was exposed to global culture, and it became easier for artists to adopt ideas and sources from outside Indonesia. Media technology like video became available to artists in the late 1980s and 1990s and gradually a small group of artists started to experiment with the medium. Krisna Murti and Heri Dono merged video with the traditional language of Wayang Kulit, the shadow theatre from Java and Bali, to create new contemporary narratives. A work of this kind on show at MACAN is Heri Dono's *Hoping to Hear From You Soon* (1992), one of the earliest experimentations with video art in Indonesia, as the curators reveal in the essay. The installation resembles a traditional warung (or food stall), where people eat and socialise, and displays a clear relationship to shadow puppetry. In the essay, the curators cite Dono as saying that his work did not aim to preserve the tradition, but rather to "re-create new signs, illustrating a widening field of Indonesian visual experience that began to encompass the global".



Krisna Murti, *Makanan tidak Mengenal Ras*, 1999, 12 toilets, 2 videos, digital print on paper, variable dimensions. Installation view at "Dunia dalam Berita", 1 May - 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN.

Krisna Murti's work *Makanan Tidak Mengenal Ras* (Foodstuffs are Ethnic, Never Racist) (1999) explores identity politics in Indonesia's culturally diverse context and the role of mass media in shaping public opinion. The installation uses food as a political tool to expose Indonesia's complexities. The work features 12 pink toilets functioning as lightboxes in which are images of Indonesian food similar to advertisements, representing dishes familiar to all Indonesians and originating from the diverse cultural exchange between different communities in the country and region's history, like European, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern. A video projection mixes footage from an Indonesian cooking programme with a state propaganda film. Also using food as a main critical element to elaborate on the ideas of identity politics is Mella Jaarsma's *I Eat You Eat Me* (2001), an interactive performance that takes place in restaurants, food courts and in the vicinity of food stalls. As the artist states, the aim is of "getting into the skin of someone else", by inviting people to join an intimate dinner. The two participants, wearing a leather bib around their neck and joined to the table between them, choose food for the person in from of them and feed each other.



Krisna Murti, *Makanan tidak Mengenal Ras*, 1999, 12 toilets, 2 videos, digital print on duratrans paper, variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society.

"Dunia dalam Berita" illustrates how contemporary artistic practices in Indonesia shifted their focus and emerged through socio-political hardships and cultural repression to expose, explore, examine and reflect on the situation the country faced. Artists became bolder and increasingly willing to engage with notions and ideas that went against the state's approval, ultimately contributing to the opening up of new ideas and perspectives not only in the art world, but also in their local socio-cultural landscape.



"Dunia dalam Berita", 1 May – 21 July 2019, installation view, Museum MACAN, Jakarta. Image courtesy Museum MACAN.



Asked about what the main takeaways of the show are for the public about the socio-political development of Indonesia and its relationship with the country's contemporary art production, Seeto responds:

*"The exhibition re-emphasizes the role of artists in times of socio-political upheaval, including bringing political discussions to public spaces and indirectly helping the society to make sense of the major changes. Though, now, information is abundant and our access to it is potentially unlimited. We have not always enjoyed these privileges. Dunia dalam Berita encapsulates the transformation of the social, political, and technological landscape and its impact on Indonesian contemporary artists, during and after Reformasi. The artists in the exhibition opened up new possibilities and conversations surrounding Indonesian contemporary art and provides a way for us to reflect on the intertwined relationship of the political situation, the history of the media and the role of artists in pressing for artistic freedom within Indonesia's democracy."*

**C. A. Xuân Mai Ardia**

**"Dunia dalam Berita" runs from 1 May to 21 July 2019 at Museum MACAN, Jakarta, Indonesia.**

*\*\*\*All quotes are from the curatorial essay in the accompanying exhibition catalogue (available towards the end of the show) and from ASIA's own interview with the museum's director Aaron Seeto, as credited within the text.*