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Heri Dono: On Art, Science, and Everything in Between

Discover how Indonesia's renowned contemporary artist experiments his way through art and technology.



Heri Dono in his office at Studio Kalahan.

There is a particular sense of serenity upon entering Heri Dono's Studio Kalahan. Its serenity, however, is laced with a bit of eeriness because there are so many mannequins you could've easily mistaken as a person. Inside Studio Kalahan are three buildings worth of archives of Heri Dono's artistic journey.

The artist himself welcomed us with cups of tea and loads of stories. Heri Dono (62) is the epitome of contemporary art. There is an unmistakable brilliance in the way he speaks, very much apparent through strings of references he casually cited during our conversation. Very much meticulous about his craft, shown through a detailed timetable of his schedule of the month, and folders of archives of his previous works, complete with the drafts and thought process.

His knack for experimenting, the artist would later reveal, has grown since his college days, when he opted not to finish the degree to pursue something newer. Walk around the studio and you'll see the manifestation of a combo between art and technology, between the right brain and left brain. Surrounded by his installation, we talked about his artistic journey, his approach to art and technology, and his definition of contemporary art.



Heri Dono, in front of his installation titled "Unidentified Unflying Objects"

How and when did you first become interested in art?

HERI DONO: When I was a child, when my father worked for President Soekarno around 1967, he often took me along to the Bogor Presidential Palace, where President Soekarno was isolated after the G30S/PKI. As a part of Tjakrabirawa, my father still worked for the president when the new government had not been established yet. Even before that, many artists often left their paintings in my house to be sent to the Bogor Presidential Palace for President Soekarno's collection. In my experience at the palace, I saw all those artists' paintings.

Then, when I was in elementary school, whenever teachers asked about my life goals, I would tell them I wanted to be an artist. My friends often answered with pilots, doctors, and engineers, but I chose to be an artist. And my goal was to enroll in ASRI, even though I didn't

know what the school was like. When I was 17, I began painting and sculpting. Then in 1980, I enrolled at ASRI Art School in Jogja, majoring in Fine Arts, where I experimented with art. For example, art and its connection with sound, forces, and kinetics, like Alexander Calder. I was first interested in kinetics that is powered by wind, by natural resources. After that, I got interested in kinetics that is powered by electronics or mechanics.

In college, there was a subject called experimental art, where I once put an object on the ceiling fan blades to make it go around. I also brought in an aquarium and turned it into an aquarium art. I eventually did so many experiments until I met Sukasman, a shadow-puppet maker. In 1988, I orchestrated a Bataknese shadow-puppet show titled *Si Tungkot Tunggal Panaluan* at Seni Sono, which is now a part of Gedung Agung near the Post Office.

When did you start going abroad?

HERI DONO: In 1990 I started to go overseas. I lived for a year in Switzerland, where I stayed in an orphanage for about six months, then moved to an artist's residence. There, I started to see paintings in museums and galleries. Switzerland is, in fact, the center of Art Basel. In the city of Basel, there is a place called Art Basel. Now, there is the annual Hong Kong Art Basel, Miami Art Basel, and so on. I started to see artworks in other countries too, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, and so on.

I came back to Indonesia in 1991, and in 1992 I joined an exhibition called "New Art from Southeast Asia" in Japan, where I went around Hiroshima, Fukuoka, Osaka, and Tokyo. The following year, I joined the "Asia Pacific Triennial" in Australia, went to a residency program in England in 1995, then held a solo exhibition at MoMA, Oxford. The traveling never stopped until right before the pandemic. In March 2019, I went from Jakarta to Jogja and have never moved since due to the pandemic. For 2.5 years I only moved between Jogja and Jakarta.

Along the way, I keep experimenting with visual arts, installation arts, shadow-puppet arts, performing arts, video arts, and sound arts; exploring conventional arts and non-conventional arts.

How do these overseas trips and residencies affect you artistically?

HERI DONO: In the development of human psychology, there are ego, id, and alter ego or superego. In the '80s, I had this dream to go overseas. At that time, I imagined that if I wasn't in Indonesia, I might get a clearer picture of Indonesia. If I stayed here, I would have difficulties differentiating between Indonesia and other countries. When I was working abroad, the issues that I wanted to convey became clearer. This was also due to a lot of information in Indonesia, particularly on the New Order era, being censored. When we talked about the 1965 coup d'état, we couldn't speak of it here in Indonesia because the military coup d'état was considered nonexistent by the government. But, that information existed abroad. If we only refer to the issues here, where everything is censored, the newspaper and all, we wouldn't be able to get inspired by the other truths, if we considered truth as a plural thing. When I was abroad, I could see, for example, the issue of discrimination in Australia, between the Native Australians and the Anglo-Saxons. Here in Indonesia, we're inclined to believe that there's no discrimination in the West when in reality, discrimination exists. After colonialism ended, they started talking about human rights, when in reality they might have done awful things to non-Europeans when the Terra nullius (nobody's island) theory emerged.

When it comes to your art, you have no limit in terms of the medium being used. What

does the creative process look like? Does the medium follow the idea or vice versa?

HERI DONO: It is a matter of convention. There is conventional art, and there are non-conventional ones. The conventional fine arts are, for example, visual arts, graphic arts, or sculpture arts. Non-conventional arts are, for example, crafts, interior design, and visual communication design, also called applied arts. Non-conventional art means they haven't been converted into a particular aesthetic field. Conventional art is considered as developing and innovating what has been converted. However, non-conventional art is more of inventiveness, it enters the area which hasn't been converted into an art medium. So, my art installations refer to non-conventional art and its inventive nature.

Then, the questions become: what is the purpose of the artwork? Does it need motions or sound? If the answer is no, then there is no need to make an installation, a painting is enough. But when the work needs those elements, for example, the work needs to be hung on the ceiling, it falls under the non-conventional category. Of course, it all refers to science. Examples are physics, Isaac Newton's concept of gravity, electronics, and motions. We have to learn all of them because this isn't just a matter of exploring the technologies, but also fulfilling the needs of those moving elements in the installation.

For example, if I want the wings to move, I need some sort of mechanics for the wings to move. My point is, when I wanted to create "Flying Angels," for example, if I made that in paintings, the message wouldn't be as strong. But, when I turned the idea into an installation, the message became more solid.



Heri Dono, Flying Angels (1996).

You mentioned using scientific theories and technologies. Do you want to emphasize the connection between art and technology in your artworks?

HERI DONO: Actually, in the Greek language, art and technology are one. Because through art and technology, culture and civilization can develop. Technology can build humans' desires. For example, when the wheel was founded, people could make wristwatches with gears and other components. What was once a horse-drawn carriage became a machine-drawn vehicle once they took out the horse and added machine and petrol. Art and technology have always been one. For example, the birth of impressionism was due to the

invention of the light bulb. Every artist at that time was crazy about light. So was cubism. Picasso discovered the phenomenon of 3 and 4 dimension spaces and then explored them in the concept of cubism. If the 3D printer existed now, maybe Picasso wouldn't paint about cubism.

Because if we see, for example, schools nowadays, there are certain distinctions between science studies and art studies, making them look unrelated on the surface level.

HERI DONO: But in practice, it also depends, because art is more of humanities, while technology is about machinery. In art, machines are used as a means to realize the ideas in our right brain about imagination, fantasy, and inspiration, which will result in perception. Perception is a truth that is open to multi-interpretation. Science and technology are more of absolute truth.

Your artworks have a lot of references to Indonesian culture, for example, shadow-puppet, gamelan, and Indonesian figures. Sometimes, even the parody of your name, like Donosaurus. Do you intend to bring up your Indonesian identity or your personal identity?

HERI DONO: We don't see tradition as something exotic. We often get trapped in the motives explored by artists as a means to identify the Indonesian identity. Meanwhile, the way I see it is more fundamental, about tradition. In tradition, all of the art disciplines are one. For example, on Java Island, or here in Jogja or Solo, dance, literature, architecture, textile, weaponry, music, shadow-puppet, et cetera, all are considered as one, with no separation. In modern art, everything is boxed into specific disciplines. There is graphic art, paintings, photography, et cetera. In traditional society, everyone is allowed to do anything outside their own discipline. Someone can sing, perform shadow-puppets, paint, sculpt, make textile, batik, and so forth. It became my foundation to make contemporary art: that maybe before modern art emerged, contemporary art already existed. Because in traditional art there were no boxes. Then, I made those parodies. Usually in contemporary art, people create some kind of level of consciousness. For example, the lower level is those who are still confused and questioning certain issues. People in the second level are those who are starting to discuss the issue. In the third level, the highest level, people are starting to laugh at issues that are actually simple but made difficult. That doesn't diminish the quality of the art. Take a look at Charlie Chaplin, who turned the issue of him migrating to America into humor when the issue was actually serious. He directed the films himself because he didn't want to be directed like a puppet. The films were criticizing the American bureaucracy who were discriminating against Chaplin, who was often portrayed as being chased by the police or immigration officers. A lot of the films were censored by the CIA, and Chaplin wasn't allowed to come back from his visit to Switzerland. That's why Charlie Chaplin's museum is in Switzerland now.



Heri Dono, Fermentation of Nose (2011).

In your opinion, how important is it for artists to make politically correct artworks?

HERI DONO: When we talk about art in relation to politics, first, there are artists who step into political practices. They might join a particular group that leans toward a certain political party. Second, there is this thing called political consciousness. Here, artists are trying to gain an understanding of political matters as a means of expression. Because generally, people who have opinions on politics exist in informal forums. For example, people in the past read the newspaper and discovered the ongoing political situation, but they don't have the means, the vessel, to express their opinions. Artists are lucky because we have the means, the vessel, of expression, for example, through writing poems or paintings. But, the artist isn't involved in any political practice, they only want to build a platform to create some level of consciousness in the society.

So the artist doesn't have any inclination toward any political parties, they simply just state the current situation.

HERI DONO: Yes, they only state what is currently happening. The artist isn't included in any political practice, they only have opinions. Actually, there were many examples of this in tradition, like Ramayana, Mahabharata, the story about Panji, Joko Tingkir, and other folktales. There are many political intricacies in those. For example, in Mahabharata, there are conflicts between the kingdoms of Pandhawa and Kurawa. In tradition, there are so many political intricacies that in the New Order era, people used the metaphor of the Hastinapura Kingdom. They didn't use Indonesia, but Hastinapura, because explicitly mentioning Indonesia would get you in jail or exile to Sukabumi at that time. So, we used metaphors. When making the painting Guernica, Picasso also created some kind of metaphor when the town of Guernica in Spain was bombed by President Franco around 1930. At that time, many civilians were killed by the military. Artists at that time had some kind of conscience to see those injustices, which were then explored into artworks that were related to large political issues.

So, it's up to the artist to bring up the political issues? Or do you have to be able to do it as an artist?

HERI DONO: No, it's not an obligation. Some artists are more interested in the matter of

spirituality or philosophical analysis which are poured into artworks that might not have figures and shapes or are even totally abstract. The phenomenon is different for each artist.



Heri Dono wearing Shura from Vherkudara's Retrospective Series.

What does being an artist in today's era mean to you?

HERI DONO: My thoughts are that artists are people who are interested in comprehensive matters. Not only about art, but also about culture and humanities. Due to the invention of artificial intelligence and robots, there is this fear that those technologies will be used by the military. But we humans have inspirations that can't be reproduced by robots and AI. They use algorithm theory which can imitate and develop, but they lack genuine inspiration. On July 29, 1969, when the first human Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon with Apollo 11, back then there were already advertisements on the satellite market. At that time, the management of human lives from outer space had begun. All of our activities right now are managed from space, be it using Instagram, WhatsApp, or Google Maps. These days, people no longer ask for directions from other people, we can go straight to our destination using maps. Therefore, right now, artists have to be inevitably informed about the latest technology. If not, they would only trail behind outdated issues, and so do their work of art. Art always keeps up with the matter of technology; it has always been throughout history.

When the industrial revolution happened, and factories put paint inside tubes, there was the Barbizon group who were able to paint outside their studios. It's always connected with other issues. Therefore, being an artist means having to always see comprehensive matters from a philosophical perspective. For example, Martin Suryajaya in *Principia Logica*, states that maybe the truth is not always subjective, but there are also truths that are based on the third person. Because our every action is recorded, maybe what we originally thought of us as ourselves is not who we truly are. Those who see our characters from an objective lens might not have the same perception of ourselves as we, the subjective one.

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