

ANU SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY

Dadang Christanto: Keeper of memories.

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Is it possible to imagine the terror and despair experienced by a human being when dragged from a home, workplace or roadside knowingly to face imminent death? Is it any easier to imagine the haunting memories of such an event, that must ceaselessly burden the victim's family? If it were at all possible to conceive of such imaginings, consider the enormity of the horror when millions of citizens carry similar memories. These memories pertain to a self-inflicted massacre committed in a quest for absolute power where ideological retribution resulted in many thousands being killed for being Communists, supposed Communists, ethnic Chinese or others.¹ As novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer noted from a report at the time, the victims were 'often no more than bewildered peasants who gave the wrong answer on a dark night to blood-thirsty hooligans.'²

Yes, these haunting memories must be unimaginable, but the keepers of these memories suffer a continual twisting of the knife as this was a silent slaughter: one that has left a legacy of fear so great that, nearly forty years after the event, the public remain silent and the stigma attached to that gruesome past forces the keepers to store their memories in silence.

Dadang Christanto is one of the keepers of these unimaginable memories, one who has experienced the continuing trauma of violence being visited upon his immediate family. 'At that time I was eight years old and living in a village. I did not understand about anything. In 1965, one morning, my father was taken away in an army truck. The five of us (the children) still were sleeping. Since then I have never seen my father again.'³

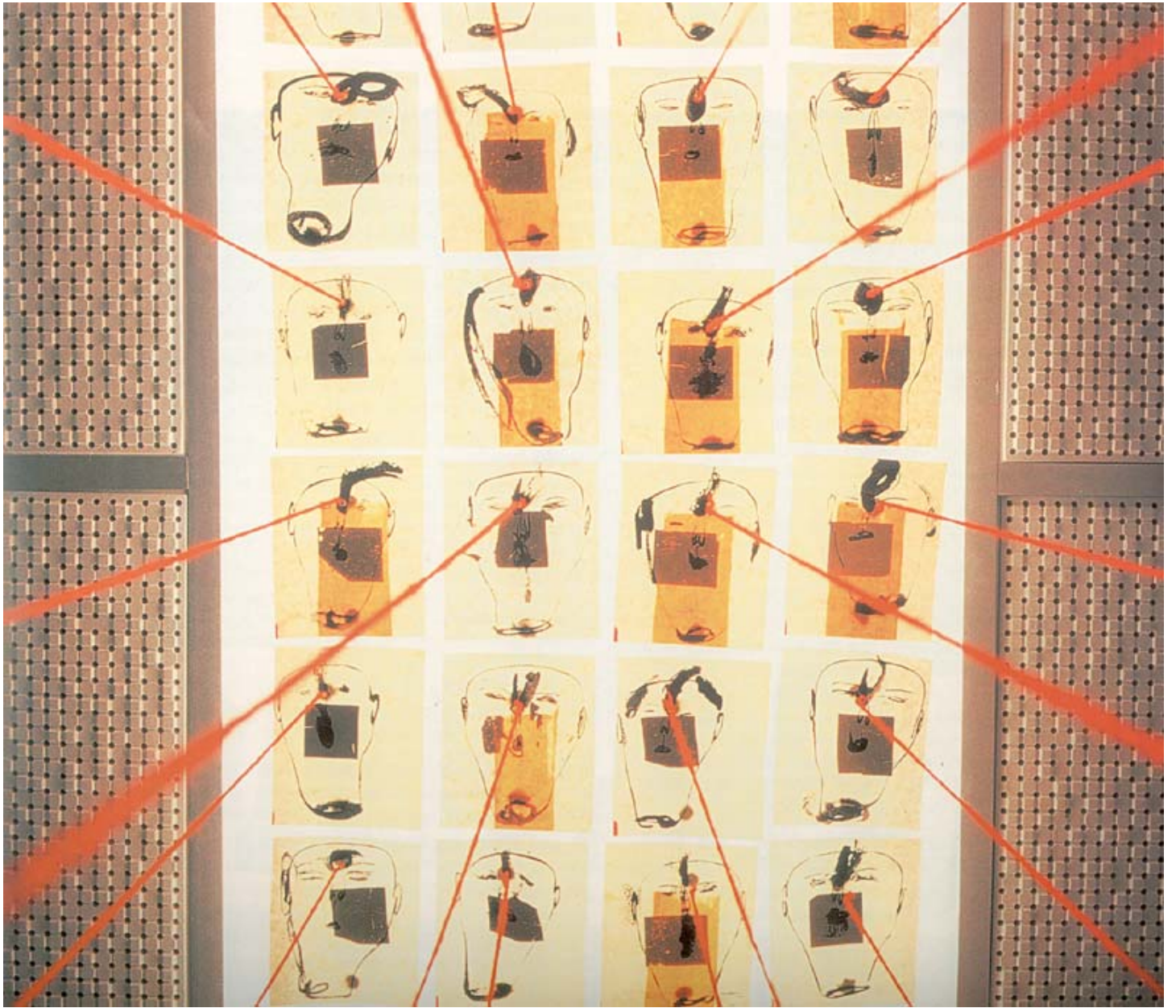
Over the last decade Dadang's installation and performative works have received critical recognition for their exceptional power to transcend cultures and specific references to evoke reflections on universal human suffering and communal grief. He is best known for his large-scale installations that employ multiples of the human body – entire bodies, dismembered parts, internal organs or metaphoric forms – to speak of these injustices suffered by the voiceless many.

Dadang's own silenced memories have given him a great empathy with others who have suffered, but even though his past works can be interpreted as relating to Indonesian historical events, it has only been in the last three years that he has felt the courage and strength to speak of his traumatic personal history.

I could not talk of my memories during the New Order period as this would have been the same as suicide. After I moved to Australia in 1999 and started living here for a while, I gradually realized I wasn't stigmatized by the general public and I began to grow courageous for giving testimony about these previous events.⁴

Dadang's recent work responds directly to personal sufferings, to the massacres of 1965-66 and the resurgence of violence toward ethnic Chinese in the 1998 riots.⁵ The artist however reminds us that his work can have multiple readings as it illuminates specific historical wrongs, simultaneously communicating a universal humanism. 'If I speak of victims, this [does] just not mean the members of PKI [Indonesian Communist Party] but everybody who has suffered the misfortune of systematic violence.'⁶ Dadang eloquently succeeds in imbuing his work with multiple readings as audiences react on universal as well as intensely individual levels, with viewers often relating specific works to personal events and tragedies.⁷ He has also been able to communicate across audiences with gallery goers and rural and urban communities alike feeling deep affinities with their personal interpretations of his works. This may be attributed to the memorial-like spiritual quality ever present in Dadang's work that offers audiences a means of healing social and personal wounds and engendering hope for the future.

Two of Dadang's recent works, *Red Rain* (1999-2000) and *The Pain of the Trees* (2003) will be exhibited in *Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights* at the School of Art Gallery, Australian National University. Both works speak universally of human rights injustices while specifically paying homage to the artist's father and all the other victims who suffered



Dadang Christanto, Red Rain, 1999-2000, mixed media, installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

under Suharto's New Order regime. Dadang speaks of how Indonesian communities were torn apart, as families of the victims were stigmatised as enemies of the State. 'The 1965 events have caused us to carry deep wounds in our heart and memory. The New Order covered these events by hiding and manipulating history.'⁸ Dadang believes it is of paramount importance to recover and reclaim this history. It is in a rejection of the New Order's officially sanctioned version of history, coupled with national acknowledgement of the truth and a reinstatement of the process of remembering, that Dadang sees as a means to unburden Indonesian society. It is through such a process that it becomes possible to create national identity and to initiate personal and community healing. In Pramoedya's words, 'I think history is important. It is a house from which people go out to travel the world. If they don't know where they came from, they won't understand their destination.'⁹

Red Rain is a ceiling and wall installation made up of a seemingly countless number of heads with blood in the form of red string spurting out from between each set of eyebrows. The strands of string form blankets of red rain suggestive of the indelible stains that continue to mark the pages of Indonesian history. All the drawn heads at first seem identical but closer inspection reveals outsized hands covering some of them. The hand drawings are alternately inscribed, 'hand of Suharto's regime' and 'U.S. Hand'. Another direct reference to Suharto's New Order regime is evident in Dadang's metaphoric use of red and black:

'The red are wounds, the black is obscurity, the history that is obscure, the evidence that is black, there is no connection with race, nor does it blossom or contain other colours.' These words immediately remind us of the hyperbole in the official film version of G 30 S [30 September Movement] PKI Tragedy repeatedly played every 1 October during the period of the New Order.¹⁰

In *Red Rain* Dadang also makes reference to the discrimination and persecution ethnic Chinese have historically faced in Indonesia. Each of his multiple drawings of heads is laminated in a reference to the official identity cards Indonesian citizens carry at all times for personal identification. Here, Dadang alludes to the racial discrimination these identification cards have caused for some Indonesians of Chinese descent. The paper used for these multiple drawings is also referential: Dadang

has used prayer paper, an object often associated with Chinese culture as it is customarily used in Buddhist ceremonies as an offering to ancestral spirits.

Red Rain is a graphically confronting piece but the artist's use of commemorative prayer paper, the high 'floating' wall and ceiling placement, along with the stillness and solemnity of its installation, evokes an overwhelming impression of solace for the departed souls. It is as if these spirits have recently flown to the heavens, finally finding peace through an act of acknowledgment.

The Pain of the Trees is a new work the artist will make during his residency at the Canberra School of Art. Once again working with multiples, Dadang will create a series of ceramic trees as homage to the world's killing fields. With particular reference to Java, Dadang talks of the trees grieving for what they have silently witnessed:

*The trees remain tortured as they stand silently where the humans were tortured and killed. Human blood moistens their roots and they groan in pain from the victim's agonized voices. They cruelly imprison these human lives.... I keep watch over the trees and I long to ask them questions. I beg them to tell their stories about the events which they bear witness. I don't hear any answers, only sighs from the tears that slowly appear on the tips of their leaves. I watch over this cruel imprisonment urging them for their stories, knowing full well these memories make their leaves trickle with tears. And these tears are their only answer, tears from the pain, grief and sorrow they continue to suffer.'*¹¹

These thoughts illustrate the pain caused by memories, and their absence. Like many families of the victims of 1965-66, Dadang does not know where his father now lies and the imagining of these absent memories can torment far more than the truth.¹² This massacre has been described as an 'event without footprints.'¹³ There has been no announcement of mass graves, but as historian Robert Cribb has observed people had to 'think carefully' before reporting them.¹⁴

Dadang Christanto realizes that he can live in silence no more and he sees these new works as part of an essential healing process for himself, his family and his community. In 2002 Dadang exhibited in Jakarta four works relating to Indonesian historical injustices in Jakarta. He was disappointed with the public's

reaction to his exhibition's theme, 'because the stigma is still very strong among the general public in Indonesia, my work probably didn't receive the reaction I was hoping for, that is for an emerging critical awareness about the history of the 65-66 period.'¹⁵ Dadang will be returning to Indonesia later this year intending to initiate dialogue with family members of other 1965 victims. He is hopeful these discussions and his ongoing projects will contribute to his country's remembering, speaking and healing and be one step closer in the slow journey of national reconciliation.

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Dadang Christanto, Untitled, 2003. Image courtesy the artist.

¹ It is estimated that between 100,000 and two million people were massacred in Indonesia from October 1965 to March 1966. The most common estimate of the death toll is 500,000. The Indonesian army and associated civilian militia groups wiped out a large number of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). See Robert Cribb, 'How many deaths?' in Ingrid Wessel & Georgia Wimhofer (eds.), *Violence in Indonesia*, Abera, Hamburg, 2001, p. 82.

² Pramodya Ananta Toer, referring to a quote from British Intelligence reports in 1966. *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/daily/special/look/indonesia/2.html>, (4 June 2003).

³ Dadang Christanto, interview with Hendro Wiyanto 4 April 2000 in Hendro Wiyanto, *Kengerian tak*

Terucapkan (The Unspeakable Horror), Exhibition Catalogue, Jakarta, 2002, p. 32.

⁴ Dadang Christanto, interview with the author, 1 June 2003.

⁵ Dadang is of Chinese descent. Anti-Chinese sentiment has been a persistent phenomenon in Indonesian history. Because of violent historical events, the anti-Chinese attacks of the 1998 riots sent exaggerated fears through the community. See John T. Sidel, 'Riots, Church Burnings, Conspiracies: The moral economy of the Indonesian crowd in the late twentieth century' in Ingrid Wessel & Georgia Wimhofer (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 47.

⁶ Dadang Christanto, interview with Hendro Wiyanto 4 April 2000 in Hendro Wiyanto, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁷ An example of this is the audience's response to *For those who have been killed...* exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery's First Asia Pacific Triennial, in 1993. Dadang invited the audience to leave a token in memory of those who have suffered. Many people repeatedly visited the exhibition primarily to leave their personal gestures of remembrances. By the close of the exhibition the floor around the work was amassed with flowers, notes and poems, which commemorated a multitude of universal and personal sufferings.

⁸ Dadang Christanto, interview, *op.cit.*, 1 June 2003.

⁹ Pramodya Ananta Toer quoted in Gerry van Klinken, *Power truth and memory: The battle for Indonesian history after Suharto*, 1999, <http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/9085/powerhtm>, (6 June 2003)

¹⁰ The Communist Party of Indonesia was blamed for the kidnapping and murder of six generals on 30 September 1965. This event was referred to as an 'attempted communist coup'. Following this there was a military decree for the Communist Party to be destroyed 'root and branches'. The massacre of 1965-66 followed. Every year on 1 October during the New Order period all television stations ran the above-mentioned official film that commemorated the dark day when the generals were killed 'that blood was red... that blood was red.' Hendro Wiyanto, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹¹ Dadang Christanto, interview with the author, 28 May 2003.

¹² Dadang tells of an account from a school friend. This friend, unaware of Dadang's personal history, would recall how each day he would go to the bank of the Brantas River to pelt the human corpses, usually decapitated, that were floating down the river. Dadang always wondered if one of these corpses could be his father.

¹³ Denis Byrne, 'Traces of '65' in Meaghan Morris & Stephen Muecke (eds.), *The Archaeology of Feeling*, UTS Review, Vol. 5, No.1, 1999, p. 41.

¹⁴ Robert Cribb, 'Introduction: problems in the historiography of the killings in Indonesia' in Robert Cribb, *The Indonesian Killings 1965-66*, Monash University, Melbourne, 1990, p. 10.

¹⁵ Dadang Christanto, interview, *op.cit.*, 1 June 2003.