

## CANBERRA CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

### ***Nindityo Adipurnomo: From solo to mass, spiritual to social***

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It was all much simpler in the late 1980s. Then Nindityo was a painter, just graduated from art school. A painter who fitted neatly into the category of contemporary Asian artists adapting select materials and styles of Euro-American invention as foreign media with which, combined with elements from their own heritage, to explore their hybrid, post-colonial identities. Nindityo had gravitated towards an abstract expressionist style to explore and express his Javanese, Indonesian, Catholic roots in the context of Suharto's militant, capitalist-driven New Order, where art for culture's sake was the safe realm and any (even cultural) involvement with critical political expression was not.

But Nindityo was also an impassioned student of Javanese dance. Enter the obsession with the body, not only in two-dimensional space, but from the late 1980s already beginning to move out from the surface of the wall and into space.<sup>1</sup> A painter obsessed with dance (he took lessons in classical Javanese dance at the Yogyakarta *kraton*), Nindityo captured the forms of the body in movement on canvas or paper, with his own hands. In the late 1980s he began to incorporate three-dimensional components, carving simple lines into wooden beams which were made part of the overall compositions of painted canvases, and beginning to employ wood carvers from around his home to create this part of his work.<sup>2</sup> The artist's paintings in the early 1990s moved from abstracted figural movement to a combination of live body movements through space and the abstracted geometric patterns created by the dancers' movements across the horizontal surface. Thus, Nindityo, in his art, was reaching further into space, and in his artistic process, was increasingly embracing social and collaborative dimensions.

In the early 1990s, when installation art began to sweep through the contemporary Indonesian art world, inspired by the first, seminal experiments and exhibitions from the mid-1970s onwards by the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (The New Art Movement) artists, many of those acclaimed the most creative of the new generation of painters, at the time in their 30s, joined in the installation fever that within a few years gripped the younger generations of Southeast Asian artists. A second development accompanied this throughout the region, particularly evident in Indonesia: the increasingly politicised messages and intentions in contemporary art, reflecting the spread of discontent with the Suharto regime and the growth in will to express reactions and analysis more openly than during the previous three decades, in society at large as well as among artists.

Nindityo and his art have travelled far, both inwardly/intellectually and outwardly/geographically, over the last decade. The intent of these forays into new modes in many ways remains oblique, engendering more questions than feelings of arrival. While the word 'spiritual' was central in his discourse and use of forms and symbols in the 1980s and early 1990s, by 1992, he had added the idea of action to this idea, a more pointed term than movement. The more contemplative energy of early works like *Bima=Dewaruci* (1988), *Worship* (1989), *Culture of Death* (1989),<sup>3</sup> and *For the Dancer* (1990), or his colour meditations on Borobudur, or Ganesha, were being opened up to what others in the Indonesian art world and beyond were doing. Still deeply immersed in discovering and 'owning', on his own terms, his ancestral iconographies, Nindityo was also searching for the connection between, on the one hand, the individual, and the culture-specific, and, on the other, the transcendent, and universal. Counterbalancing his interest in the universal and spiritual in 1988 Nindityo was also focusing on himself as an individual. Then in 1992 the term 'spiritual' is replaced in one of his statements by 'religion': The aesthetic is religion for art. Every effort to expand values and human meaning, in its process, becomes the basis of art. Art then becomes the world religion.<sup>4</sup> With this shift, focus has slid away from the individual, direct, perhaps mystical communion with the divine through meditation and solitary ritual, familiar aspects of Javanese (*kejawan, kebatinan*) spiritual traditions, towards the human creations of social institutions, in this case, around human-divine negotiations – but from here, openness to other kinds of human institutions, and to the socially rooted and manipulated psychological processes of individuals and groups, is but a short step. To his 'interiorised/vertical/depth' exploration, Nindityo has more and more consciously been adding an 'externalised/horizontal/breadth' dimension.

In Nindityo's art, this shift was signaled by a departure from focusing on the human body as dancer, or as mythological figure, or as individual artist-auteur, to focusing on fragmented, de-(re-?)contextualized parts – often presented as a group, or even mass, with variations on a single theme. Deconstruction, the mode of the last two decades of the twentieth century, had entered Nindityo's work across a bridge of a few strands of straight, black hair.

In the early 1990s, talk of Nindityo's obsession with (Javanese) women's traditional hairpieces (*konde*), worn when dressed up in the *kain-kebaya*<sup>5</sup> started circulating. What was this all about? A fetishisation of



Nindityo Adipurnomo, *Hiding rituals of my own hairpiece*, 1997, mixed media, 60 x 50 x 20cm. Image courtesy the artist.

an isolated cultural element, a highly gendered one; the artist's obsession with his mother's and grandmother's generations and the enshrined image of the traditionally socialized Javanese feminine? Then the artist started collecting his own hair; there were even rumours of pubic hair. Enter the masculine component to the theme of hair, and an excessively private one, at that. And one shared by men and women.

In a 1998 catalogue Indonesian writer, Dwi Marianto provides a culturally contextualised reading of Nindityo's work:

*Nindityo's works are complicated and parallel to the nature of high Javanese krama that is spoken in Surakarta and Yogyakarta ... as a whole, his art still feels like krama, in which one must state intentions in graceful, refined language... The real idea or intention that is to be conveyed becomes lost in the grace of the refined words of the language. Nindityo's work is an apt representative of Javanese culture with all its strengths and weaknesses – a culture which in many ways is the heartbeat of Nindityo's own thought and feelings.<sup>6</sup>*

This helps. But it must not limit the interpretation to Nindityo representing a 'typical' Javanese and hide his increasingly overtly exhibited hybrid make-up. While the early years of his *konde* obsession appeared limited to the deconstructed fragments of neo-traditional Javanese femininity, throughout the last decade the masculine comes to be represented alongside (or in intimate marriage to) the feminine. *Lingga-Yoni* (1992) could be seen as an early expression of this same idea, though it is a highly traditionalist piece, rooted in Nindityo's search for his Javanese roots; the more conceptual-abstract/satirical reworking of this idea can be seen in the series of 2001 installations and photographs. We see Javanese men photographed in black and white head-and-shoulder shots, but their faces are covered with huge kondes of hair. In 1998, in the *Helmet Your Art* exhibition, in a series of photographic/multimedia works, Nindityo's own face is photographed and displayed inside larger-than-life-size, open *konde* structures made of basketry – the artist/man, his own long hair twisted into strange, snail-shell formations, viewed within these delicate 'prisons', container-like wombs, and like the social structures which on all levels shape and contain the individual, till s/he begins to locate these through expanding awareness and strategises how and why to break free of what parts of the container. *War/heads*, the other idea Nindityo plays with in his Canberra installation, is another aspect of the Western-colonial/post-colonial legacy in the globalisation game.

In his many installations on the theme of the *konde*, Nindityo has employed more people with specific skills to help him realise the forms he dreamed up. Not only wood carvers living around his home in Yogyakarta but also stone carvers and basket-



Nindityo Adipurnomo, Portraits of Javanese Men, 2001, photograph, 25 x 37 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

weavers are commissioned (and, in a post-economic crash Indonesia, paid – no small matter in itself). *Konde* appeared in stone, wood, drawings and photographs. In the same way that hair is a collective phenomenon, Nindityo's concerns have become more evidently plural than a decade ago. Last year, the mass symbol/body-element of hair was connected with that of feet. In the 2002 exhibition, *Beyond the Modesty*, gallery visitors of all ages and genders were invited to step on the *konde*, like stepping stones in a maze-like journey across the floor.

In 2003, Nindityo is looking to a new material to create his new installation, to be created for the exhibition in Canberra, this time one not appropriated by New Order Javanationalist rhetoric. Suharto is gone, and apparently, for now, so is Nindityo's play with gender and Java-specific icons. Perhaps living in this post-September 11th world blew him beyond cultural specificities, to larger if not panhuman perspectives. An item of western style clothing, socks were introduced to Indonesia in the wake of colonialism. An item of clothing that signals class and group membership as clearly as many others, and the presence or absence of which is read variously by different groups.

Nindityo's art is not merely 'installation art' in the static, gallery-space sense the term often implies. It often combines elements of installation, performance, and audience interaction, and the way the artist speaks or writes about it, it begins with the conception of the idea, the collaborative development of further ideas, the collective work preparing the spatial expression of it, the various subjective appreciations and reinterpretations (additive creations) of it, and the documentation of it:

*In institutionalised art I sense 'competition' is getting increasingly tough. It is from this very point that the awareness of skill takes shape. Skill is not developed for the sake of competition but, more importantly, for survival. It is now the time to elaborate the definition of 'globalisation' so that it does not only signify 'competition'. If 'global' is only taken to mean 'competition', then we are lower than animals.<sup>7</sup>*

Individual rights are human rights; group rights are human rights. A multitude of individual people's used socks covers two missile-shapes, one located symbolically in Indonesian military space, the other in Australian, each pointing at the other. The socks are envisioned as a united message from regular citizens of both nations. What are they saying? What messages are they birthing in you? And you, and you, and you? What actions do they signify and perhaps inspire?

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*Susu* (Coffee with Milk), at the Erasmus Huis, Jakarta, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> From Nindityo Adipurnomo, 'Compilation of Ideas,' personal writing sent as email to author in May 2003.

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<sup>1</sup> The history, analysis and interpretation of the Euro-American traditions of performance, body and installation art (and their derivations and crossovers) is in its early phases, as testified to by every writer approaching the subject in the last two decades. While curators and art historians writing about contemporary Asian installation/performance art for the most part exhibit an 'allergy' towards its ancestral roots and contemporary inspirations in indigenous community ritual, this history should not be eschewed where appropriate. The fear of 'orientalising' is naturally with us who write about Asian art (or any art of any other), yet self-censorship or lack of allergenic awareness leads to the very kinds of orientalising silences we attempt to critique.

<sup>2</sup> See *Gunungan* (1990) and *The Cyclical Return of the Commemoration of the Dead*, (1990), in Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit and Mountain: Preoccupations of Indonesian Painters*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1994, colour plates 13 and 24.

<sup>3</sup> For reproductions of these, see Wright, *op.cit.*, pp. 103-5.

<sup>4</sup> Artist's statement from 1992 installations at the Japanese Cultural Centre, Exhibition Catalogue, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Tightly wrapped batik sarong and fancy, lacey or silky, tightly tailored long sleeved blouse.

<sup>6</sup> Catalogue accompanying the exhibition of Mella Jaarsma's and Nindityo Adipurnomo's work entitled *Kopi-*