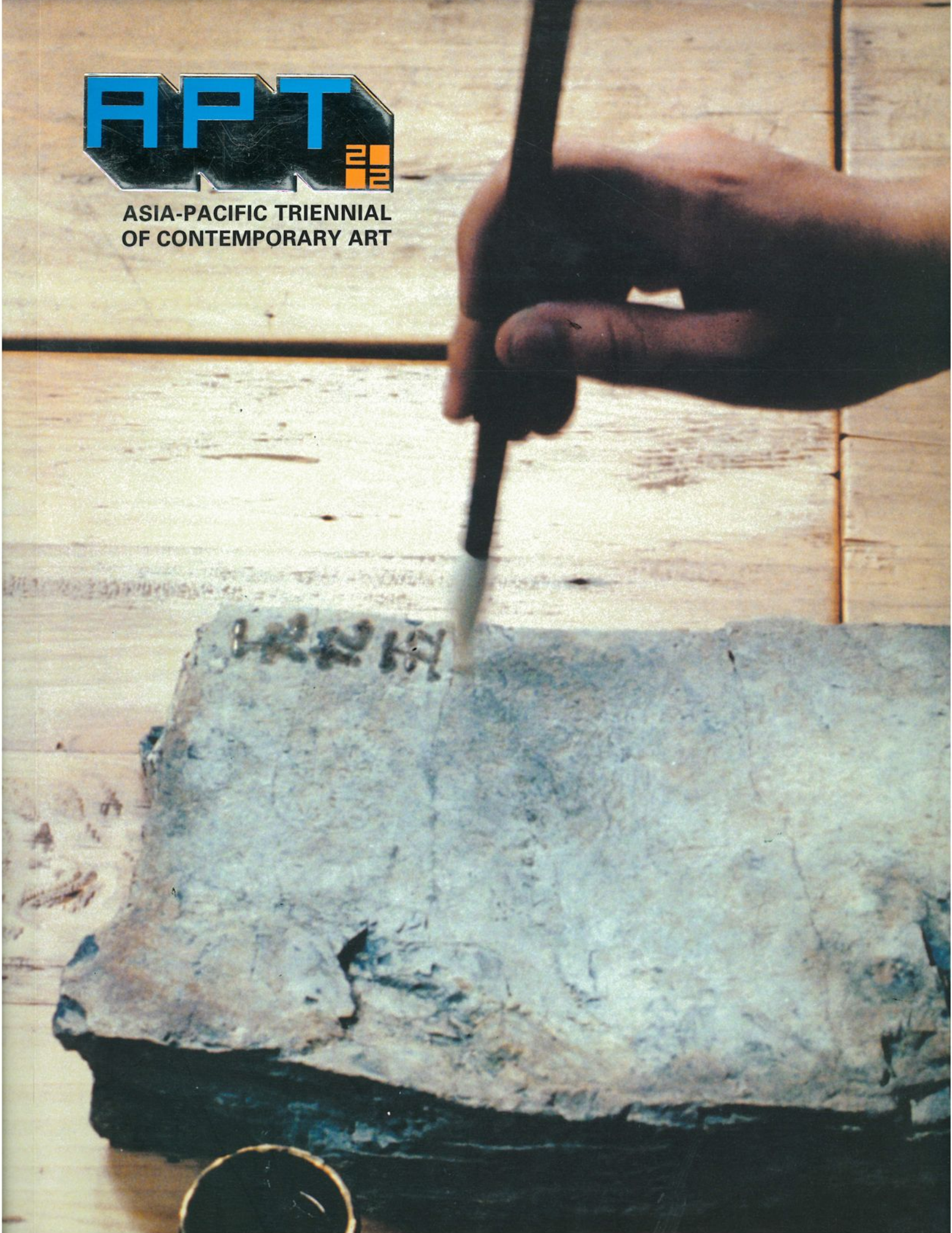




ASIA-PACIFIC TRIENNIAL
OF CONTEMPORARY ART



HERI DONO – THE MULTIPLE MATTERS OF MODERN LIFE

The lively, parodic and hybrid universe of Heri Dono is always crowded — packed to bursting point. His sculptures and installations, even more than his paintings, are tightly crammed in serried ranks, with the same figure repeated many times over. The constant reiteration of figures in Heri's works is striking: these multiple representatives of humanity, identical in all respects, are not specifically either masculine or feminine, though they are modelled on the artist's own head. With this image Heri Dono presents the Indonesian everyman, the *orang kecil* or 'little man'. The *orang kecil* is a figure of great rhetorical power in contemporary Indonesian society, and the vehicle of Indonesians' empathy for their fellows.

Importantly, identification with the *orang kecil* is a privileging of group identity over individual ego that is integral to Javanese conceptions of person and society. In this world view, the individual *orang kecil* sits within the greater whole of the *masarakyat*, literally the mass of the people, a modern term that translates vernacular Indonesian collectivity into quasi-socialist terms. In 2000, Heri Dono explicitly affirmed his deep affinity with the *orang kecil*:

I have worked with many other individuals in the creative process, most of whom were 'ordinary people'. The installation art and the performances that I have created, including my version of the *wayang*, have all involved the input of a wide variety of individuals, from friends involved in electronics, mechanics, construction, crafts and various arts, and others, including *becak* drivers and grave diggers.

Significantly, the *becak* (tricycle) driver is the quintessential *orang kecil*, and many *becak* drivers live in the Kleben area of Yogyakarta, with which Heri Dono has had a longstanding relationship.¹

The three major works selected for APT 2002 are structured through these ranks, grids and reiterations, embodying the sense in which the Javanese individual is firmly embedded in the matrix of a social whole. It is also important to note that the grid, a significant aspect of European modernist art in Heri Dono's youth, has clearly offered an aesthetic principle useful to the artist and legible for international audiences. However this does not adequately account for the prevalence of the form in Heri Dono's art. The mandala of Javanese culture provides a more apposite and compelling principle, replete with mystical significance. Recently Heri referred to the significance that he attributes to this form, speaking about the mandalas of Borobodur, the great eighth-century Buddhist monument outside Yogyakarta, and to the layout of the city itself, which 'places the *kraton* (the Sultan's palace) both physically and spiritually at the centre of the consciousness of the community.'² The mandala is thus a map of a different world, where the works of Heri Dono originated and where they may still be found.



Top: The artist's preliminary sketch for *Glass vehicles* 1995 Below: *Glass vehicles* (detail) 1995 Glass, fibreglass, cloth, lamps, cable, iron, toy carriages 15 units: 125 x 40 x 40cm each Collection: The artist Courtesy: Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta



Angels caught in a trap (detail) 1996 Mixed media
60 x 135 x 19cm each Courtesy: Cemeti Art House,
Yogyakarta



The chair 1993 Performance, September 1993 The First
Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art
Gallery

Mandalas are also firmly located in the present. Heri's assemblies suggest mass organisations — the bureaucracy, the army, modern classrooms — prompting questions about the powerlessness of individuals and the power of those directing them. In *Ceremony of the soul* 1995, for instance, we recognise the predicament of modern humanity, experienced in Indonesia during the 32 years of Suharto's dictatorial 'New Order', as an extreme form of powerlessness. As many commentators on Heri Dono's work have noted, the 'New Order' was a topsy-turvy world in which the normal logic of events was overturned. Thus education became a technology of *mis*-education, journalism was a technology of propaganda, and nothing was as it appeared to be.

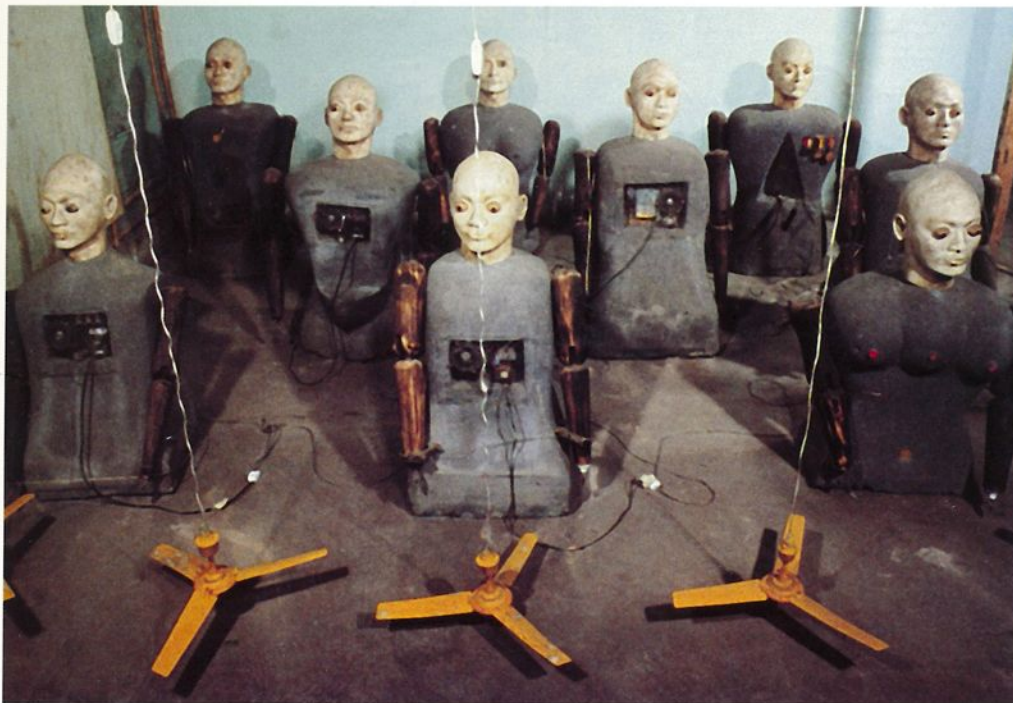


Makan pelor (*Eating bullets*) 1992 Synthetic polymer
paint and collage on cardboard Purchased 1995
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery

These questions of individual agency are sharply focused by Heri Dono's fascination with mechanical, especially clockwork, devices. Each of his personae is part human, part doll: human in form but with mechanical components. Mechanical devices from clockwork to bicycles to sewing machines are still the principal signifiers of modernity in Indonesia. Even by the 1990s, when Heri Dono made these works, the digital revolution had not overtaken Indonesia, either in the daily life of the great mass of Indonesian people or in the Indonesian imagination.

In fact, the immediate accessibility of Heri Dono's work to Indonesian audiences is a major factor in his choice of images and materials. His dolls are stand-ins or doppelgangers, evidently cousins of the puppets of the *wayang* theatres, and it is well-known that Heri is extremely knowledgeable about Indonesian *wayang* traditions, from *wayang kulit*, which is most familiar to Westerners, to *wayang benda* and *wayang orang*. Like other *wayang* characters, Heri Dono's figures explore potentially explosive contemporary issues through richly allusive and indirect means. This licence to range broadly over contemporary issues is still a key social role of the *wayang*, where sensitive and scandalous issues are regularly canvassed as comic asides from the great classical narratives of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. However, in the 1990s *wayang pantjasila* and *wayang revolusi* also explicitly promoted specific political agendas, as their respective names suggest. Thus Heri Dono's art must be understood in the context of these proliferating appeals to Indonesian popular opinion, aspects of both control and resistance.³

There are also rich Western sources for Heri Dono's quasi-human dolls, in narratives since the eighteenth century about automata and robots. (Apinan Poshyananda's description of Heri's Yogyakarta studio compares it to the workshop of a nineteenth-century mechanical wizard.)⁴ The role of the automaton is always to radically question the status and actions of human beings. 'Standing in' for human protagonists, Heri Dono's dolls embody the key issue in modern science fiction posed by robots and androids: what is the relationship between mechanical and human consciousness, or, in the title of a famous science-fiction novel, 'Do androids dream of electric sheep?'⁵



Ceremony of the soul 1995 Stone, fibreglass, plastic, radio and tape player, lamps, fans, wood Nine figures: 70 x 60 x 50cm each Collection: The artist Courtesy: Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta

The imagery of automata has persisted through modern animated cartoons, which Heri Dono has loved since youth. Heri wrote of *Flying angels (Bidadari)* 1996 that it was

... inspired by the Flash Gordon stories, created long before Neil Armstrong flew to the moon in the Apollo 11 spacecraft ... For me, the *Bidadari* is an extremely personal symbol of freedom of conscience, replacing the *Garuda* symbol that has been used as a symbol of collective ideology and propaganda to prevent individuals from developing their intellect and personality freely.⁶

If Heri Dono is a modern *dalang*, a *wayang* puppet-master, the key question is whether puppets, human-like, are able to break free of their master or whether, puppet-like, humanity is ultimately doomed, unable to challenge tyrants. This issue was undoubtedly the key theme in the resistance of Indonesian intellectuals to 'New Order' society and culture, and Heri Dono one of the artists who most successfully articulated it.

This socially located resistance in Heri Dono's work has a crucial spiritual dimension. Ideas of soul and spirit are the foundation of Javanese (and other Indonesian) indigenous animist beliefs, which attribute in-dwelling spirits to all things, whether animate or apparently inanimate. Awareness of spirits in the world is crucial to Indonesian contemporary art and Heri Dono has recently reaffirmed his affiliation with Javanese animism.⁷ As Indonesian art historian and curator Jim Supangkat notes, Heri Dono not only works in an artistic community where the spiritual basis of art is widely recognised, but Heri also confirms that his work is rooted in spirituality: 'I tend to counter rational conclusions in my mind that observes things through materiality. In this process I rely on spirituality and aesthetical experiences that very often provide me with surprising ideas which show some kind of paradox.'⁸

Of course, Heri Dono has made many works that depart from his pattern of reiterated figures. Two recent works are allegories, which feature huge central figures and deal quite directly with recent events. *Raksasa* 2001 was based on a tale from the Mahabharata, and referred obliquely to circuits of influence and resistance in Indonesian and world politics. The second work, *Trojan Horse* 2002, used the Greek story of the Trojan Horse to represent the American post-September 11 invasion of Afghanistan, with a multitude of tiny figures parachuting from the 'horse' in the sky.⁹ In the past Heri Dono did not represent figures of power and authority so straightforwardly. This new frankness is evidence that the social and artistic repressions of 'New Order' Indonesia are relaxing, and that artists are, as many commentators have noted, now free to express themselves more openly.

Heri Dono is reconfiguring the theme of misused power in this new political environment. If the central dominating figures of *Raksasa* represent power, the small figure at their feet attests to the ingenuity of resistance: in the original myth Bima was induced to climb inside the ear of the tiny Dewa Ruci, in a successful inversion of normal power relations. Less optimistically, the cloud of tiny parachutists descending from the Trojan Horse of American air-power surely represents the 'small man' of the American armed forces as misguided — a 'puppet' in the invasion. Thus Heri Dono continues to mobilise the rich cultural resources of Indonesian modernity: as power takes new forms the artist, and the people, continue to invent new ways to evade it.

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