

ANALYSIS OF A WORK OF ART#1

DADANG CHRISTANTO IN THE ART GALLERY OF NSW

For the first analysis of an Indonesian work of contemporary art, I have chosen the piece by Dadang Christanto titled *They Give Evidence*, in the possession of the Art Gallery of NSW and often on display in the central section of their Asian wing.

There are many reasons behind this choice. Dadang has been one of the first and most successful Indonesian artists internationally who has chosen Australia as his home base and, as this website has, perforce, an Australian bias, Dadang's position is symbolic. Bridging Australia and Indonesia as he does, he raises a number of issues concerning the effect of globalisation on identity. Although Dadang travels regularly to Indonesia and continues to involve himself and his work in Indonesian social and political conditions, he is sometimes considered not quite Indonesian any more. The work itself also had a history of exhibition that is, in itself, an illustration of globalisation in artistic practice, as shall be shown.

The work, *They Give Evidence*, when it is out on display, dominates the space in the Asian wing with sixteen larger than life figures and demands that the gallery visitor asks who, what, where, why and when - questions a good work of art will provoke.



They Give Evidence, standing figures holding clothing made from cloth and resin. The figures are made from terracotta powder mixed with resin/fibreglass

They Give Evidence was first shown in *Art in Southeast Asia*, 1997, in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, followed by an exhibition in Hiroshima, Japan. The work was funded by a grant from the Japanese government and originally consisted of twenty figures, male and female. They were constructed with the assistance of the people in Dadang's home village of Kaliurang, Central Java, from a ground brick mixture the villagers use for their buildings. All face in one direction and hold in their outstretched arms fiberglass stiffened clothing in the shape of the bodies that once wore them. The figures are the victims of 1965 but, with the clothing, they also represent the recent victims of the riots during the collapse of the Suharto regime: the victims of the past are presenting the victims of the present.



Installation of 20 figures in Tokyo, 1997

In Japan members of the audience left offerings and mementos at the feet of the statures. Although this has occurred before with other works of his, for example in the Queensland Art Gallery with his performance/installation in the first Asia-Pacific Triennial; Dadang understood that on this occasion, the offerings were made in the spirit of

apology for the Japanese occupation of Indonesia during the Second World War.

What becomes obvious by comparing the figures exhibited in Tokyo and the first image of them above in the Art Gallery of NSW is the impact of lighting. Theatrical lighting has been used to add a sense of drama and solemnity and it contributes to the emotional impact on viewers. Installation art will use any element, conventional or otherwise, to engage the audience who move through the figures rather than being limited to a single viewpoint. Installation art which appeared in Euro-American art exhibitions in the 1970s, was distinguished from conventional sculpture by making the spatial environment integral to the artwork.



Dadang Christanto at the opening of the new Asian wing of the AGNSW, 2003

The scale of the figures is also important. Rather than victims who have been bowed by experience, they are monumental; they testify and bare witness. They are not individualized and are distinguished only by sex, for they stand for everyone. This is when the viewer demands to know who, what, where, why and when, and the recent history of Indonesia is called upon to provide answers. Dadang was a victim himself for, in 1965, his father was taken from the family as they were sleeping at night and never seen again - one of thousands, some say millions, who were 'disappeared' during the bloodbath surrounding the overthrow of President Sukarno and the installation of President Suharto.

Dadang's marginalization as a Chinese Indonesian, a persecuted ethnic group that was again targeted during the riots in the *Reformasi* period, only partly explains the effect of these figures. Where one expressive figure may represent Dadang's experience, these serried ranks evoke all victims of power politics and prejudice.

Installation art was often site-specific and impermanent and could be moved, reconstructed and accrue different meanings in different contexts. This particular work had an extraordinary history of exhibition. From its inception in Indonesia, it travelled to Japan and Brazil where six figures from the work were shown in the *XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo*, in 1998, before it

returned to Indonesia and finally ended at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. International audiences were moved and sympathetic, as seen in Japan, but the reaction in Indonesia was very different.

Dadang exhibited *They Give Evidence* as part of his retrospective at *Bentara Budaya*, the *Kompas* exhibition space, in Jakarta, in July 2002. Local residents objected to the figures which were installed in the grounds outside the arts complex, saying that that the figures, being naked, were pornographic and children were playing obscenely with them. Dadang and the curator, Hendro Wiyanto, discussed the situation with a delegation from the residents and Dadang agreed to cover the figures with black plastic - the plastic, he had found previously, had an interesting effect as, he said, he thought the figures looked 'like Ninja'.¹ But the day after the exhibition opened, at Friday evening prayers in the local mosque, the Imam said he would report the exhibition to the Council of Ulama, the powerful religious leaders, and the *Kompas* administration was sufficiently concerned that they had the figures removed and stored.

Many articles were written about the experience of this exhibition, including one by FX Harsono, who pointed out that the naked human form was commonly used in artistic expression, and he argued strongly against acceding to pressure from minority groups.² But debate was raging in Indonesia over the legislation for new pornography laws and, in this heated environment, Dadang's figures lost their status as an autonomous art object and became a tool for the exercise of moral and religious influence. This was not the only example of rising Islamic fundamentalism affecting the arts after *Reformasi*.

Dadang's installation finally ended its journey in Australia. In 2003 the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased *They Give Evidence*, and Dadang was invited to take up a residency at the University of NSW, College of Fine Arts, to restore the work and install it.³

While meaning in an artwork can change in different contexts, globalisation sped up the process. Globe-trotting artists and artworks encounter a wider range of audiences who bring local experiences and different interpretations. On the one hand Dadang's work is Indonesian - it springs from Indonesian experience; but on the other hand it speaks of universal issues to an international audience.

¹ Dadang speaking at a public lecture, University of NSW, College of Fine Arts, October 8th, 2003. Dadang had previously wrapped figures in black plastic in his installation for the Asia-Pacific Triennial/3 in 1999.

² Harsono, FX, 2002, *Pameran Seni Rupa Dadang Christanto, Menyodorkan Bukti Kekerasan Masih Terjadi*, Art Exhibition of Dadang Christanto, Proving that Violence Still Occurs, *Kompas*, Jakarta. <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0207/14/seni/meny18.htm> accessed 1/11/02.

³ The history of the work, *They Give Evidence*, was confirmed in a phone conversation with Dadang, 9/10/03.