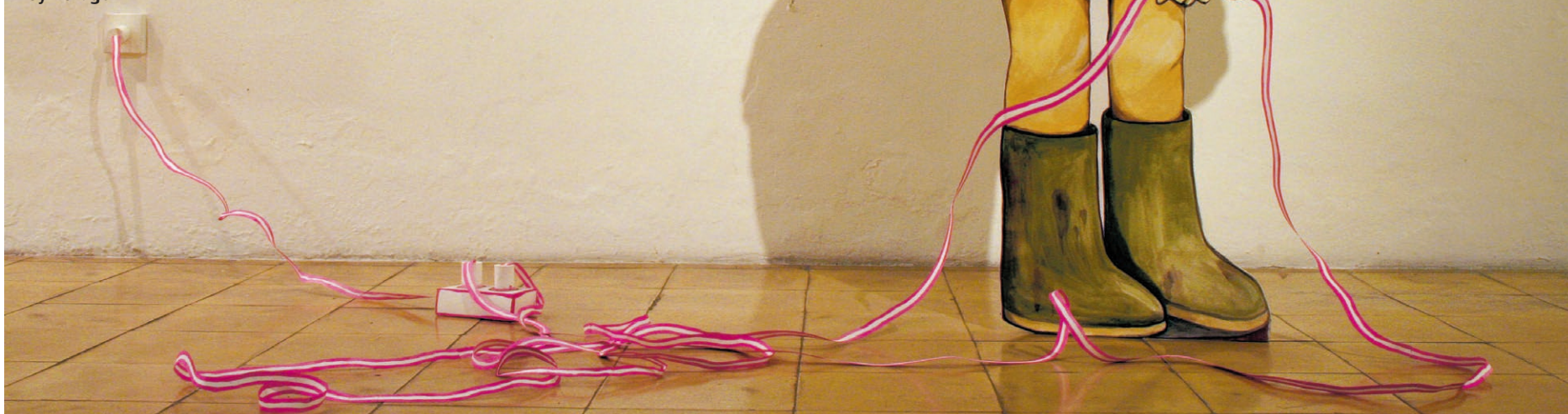


# Whip it up!

Art is a foreign country, discovers Winterson one cold December day in Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> The place of discovery, though, is of no significance; it could very well have been in Manchester, or Bandung. The work of art she saw made her pause, ponder and revisit it. And because the language of art is not our mother-tongue, we have to engage with artworks to learn to passionately appreciate works of art – a part of this learning process is that we slowly learn to differentiate and become able to offer reasons beyond merely liking this, but not that, particular work of art.

Roy Voragen



## The Art House

Above: Restu Ratnaningtyas, "Connection no.1", 2010. Acrylic and watercolor on paper, play wood 180x200x40cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Cemeti Art House (Residency project HotWave #1, 2010).

Below: Dian Ariany, "Jelly's Chair", 2011. Wood, rattan 170x80x50cm  
(Exhibition Beastly at Cemeti Art House, 2011).

EVER SINCE my late teens I have been going to see exhibitions in major art museums and small art spaces; back then I was oblivious of discourses on and prices of art. And it is a journey I continued; I went to provincial towns and capital cities, back alleys and main streets; first in Europe and since 2003 in Southeast Asia. As a fresh graduate from the University of Amsterdam, I came to Bandung to give a workshop at ITB's art school. While my stay in Indonesia now requires periodic visits to an immigration office or the nearest embassy abroad – to fill out forms, get them stamped, signed and photocopied, to get my picture taken and to leave my fingerprints behind again and again – the arts thankfully do not demand visa and other paraphernalia of officialdom.<sup>2</sup>

I am, however, not saying that art 'speaks' with a unified universal language – art is chaotic and cacophonous. Senior curator and art critic Jim Supangkat claims that art from this region 'speaks' with an accent,<sup>3</sup> but he seems to imply that art from elsewhere, say Amsterdam or Manchester, has no accent. Great art is transgressive, not just in the sense that it can violate our visual, stylistic, moral or political conventions, but also in the sense that it could be transcultural. Recently, at a seminar at ITB's art school,<sup>4</sup> Supangkat analyzed the term global art, which has been *en vogue* the last decade or so. He claims that it's, more than anything, related to how the art market operates in our times of globalization. Is it really a problem, though, if the West only pays lip service to inclusivity? It's the West's loss if it remains ignorant of the many fantastic developments in this region.

Contemporary art from Indonesia is hot: exhibitions around the world attest to that. This hides the fact, though, that the art's infrastructure at home is in a dire state; for example, no university has a department of art history, which is as unfortunate as the fact that Indonesia does not – yet – have a public art museum. Of course, Indonesia has quite a few private art museums. However, a museum should be more than a building with a collection, it should also facilitate research and publications.<sup>5</sup> Still, when I visit exhibitions, artist studios, artist-initiative spaces and galleries I see plenty that doesn't warrant cynicism, as is the general mood when the arts infrastructure is the topic of conversation.

### A home for criticality

Recently, I took a train from Bandung to Yogyakarta – a city famous for its *kraton*, where Sultan Hamengkubuwono X reigns (he is also the governor of the Yogyakarta province), and the nearby Borobudur and Prambanan temples – at the invitation of Ellert Haitjema, an artist visiting from the Netherlands. He picked me up from the station and off we went by motorcycle, by-passing the hectic touristic Marlioboro Street and the *kraton*. Left and right I saw graffiti I hadn't seen on my last visit. Ellert took me to *Rumah Seni Cemeti*, Cemeti Art House, where he had just finished his three-month artist-in-residency. We sat down, talked about his work, sipping sweet coffee and smoking incessantly until dusk.

Cemeti Art House was founded in 1988, and just celebrated its 25th anniversary (first called Cemeti Gallery, changing its name in 1999). It is the brainchild of Nindityo Adipurnomo and Dutch-born Mella Jaarsma,<sup>6</sup> who are practicing artists as well; the genesis took place at their home within the *kraton* – the living room was turned into an exhibition space. In 1995, the Cemeti Art Foundation was founded for documentation and research purposes, which was renamed Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA) in 2007.<sup>7</sup> In 1999, Cemeti moved to its current address – architect Eko Prawoto designed the building beautifully – just south of the *kraton*, where it became the neighbor of Kedai Kebun Forum,<sup>8</sup> founded by Agung Kurniawan.

At the time of Cemeti's founding, Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime was still in power; the regime's extrajudicial executions of petty criminals and the dumping of their bodies in public spaces had only recently come to a halt – Suharto's shock therapy to remind Indonesia who was in charge. There was no way to predict that Suharto would be forced to step down in 1998. Not just the political but also the cultural landscape of the time was different from today. Cemeti was the very first artist-initiative art space in Indonesia. It was established to respond to the difficulty of many to exhibit, especially those working in the media of installation and performance art, because commercial galleries focused on paintings.

Cemeti's domicile might have been modest, but from the onset it was a place packed with ambition. FX Harsono, Agung Kurniawan, Heri Dono, Agus Suwage, Tisna Sanjaya, Eko Nugroho, Tintin Wulia and Jompet Kuswidananto, among many others, all exhibited at Cemeti and are currently all globe-trotting today's art world. Notably, many of the works shown at Cemeti are critical – a criticality considered unbecoming by many. Tisna Sanjaya claims that most art is merely eye-candy to be sold as commodities on the crazy art market.

Nindityo Adipurnomo and Mella Jaarsma lament the apolitical attitude of many in the arts; recently they wrote: "The arts are in crisis, and we hope for a reaction – any initiative that could shake things up. But, to be honest, those in the art community who are voicing concerns are mostly 35 years and older. Meanwhile, the younger generation moves around either in a comfort zone or in confusion, not wanting to be patronized by the previous generation and at the same time not having enemies to rebel against."<sup>9</sup> Not all art needs to be political. Not all artists need an enemy. However, what's alarming is that many youngsters, not only young artists and curators, have little awareness of politics or its history (what retired generals Wiranto and Prabowo did (or did not do) in the late nineties seems to not worry them).

### Residency program

Artist R.E. Hartanto, who exhibited with three Bandung-based artists at Cemeti in 2006, was amazed with the ease and tranquility with which their exhibition was set up.<sup>10</sup> This was the result of years of experience and discipline. During the nineties, Cemeti only occasionally received artists-in-residence, but by 2006 it had developed a structured residency program in the form of 'Landing Soon' (sponsored by the Dutch embassy in Jakarta and Heden in The Hague), which invited artists from Indonesia and the Netherlands to Yogyakarta. In 2010, this residency program was continued as 'HotWave' to include artists from Australia (the latter are sponsored by Asialink) and artists from Asia (who have to bring their own funding).

Cemeti's residency program promotes exchange, research, experimentation and collaboration. It is not just for artists; Cemeti has opened its doors for curators, writers and managers to undertake a residency as well. The program can further one's career – because curators from abroad have found their way to Cemeti – although this is rarely the main motivation to apply to the program. For example, Bandung-based video art collective Tromarama had already exhibited in a dozen countries by the time they participated in the HotWave#4 residency in 2012. For Indonesian artists, Tintin Wulia says, a residency is an excellent way to connect to a local audience.<sup>11</sup> And as Ellert Haitjema mentioned,<sup>12</sup> a residency in a new environment sharpens one's senses. He particularly enjoyed using objects of which he didn't understand the use – to put it crudely: a table isn't recognized



## Cemeti Art House and 25 years of contemporary art



“Art, all art ... is a foreign country,  
and we deceive ourselves  
when we think it familiar ...  
We have to recognize  
that the language of art, all art,  
is not our mother-tongue.”

Jeanette Winterson

as a table – and with their utility out of the picture his imagination could run wild. Upon his return to Amsterdam, he was able to revisit his earlier works and approach them anew.

Tromarama saw the interaction with foreign artists as an interesting aspect to the residency,<sup>13</sup> despite how visual and verbal miscommunications can occur because of different cultural backgrounds and reference points. Another problem might be – at least for Cemeti – the unpredictability of whether the artists will collaborate fruitfully or will actually create a good presentation at the end of the residency. In fact, it is even possible that an artist might discontinue her or his practice after completing the residency. However, it's worth the gamble.

### What's in a name?

After 25 years, Cemeti has a solid name; so much so that I never even stopped to think what the word means. In fact, in Sanskrit it means 'whipping up' – as in: creating movement. In the context of Cemeti Art House, it has garnered a new meaning altogether; it now refers to an art space, its programming and all those people responsible for its flourishing. Cemeti has become an institution in its own right, which Mella Jaarsma is reluctant to admit; she writes: “Cemeti is often no longer seen as the 'alternative', but as an established art institution [...]. What are we alternative to, if there is no establishment except commercial galleries?”<sup>14</sup> Sure, Cemeti cannot be an alternative to non-existent public art museums. And for a long

Above: Arya Pandjalu, “Jaga Tanah Ini” (Take care for this Land), 2008 Resin, wood, shoes, car paint 120x53x93cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cemeti Art House (Exhibition Beastly, 2011).

Below: Wimo Ambala Bayang, “Belanda Sudah Dekat” (The Dutch are getting close), 2008. Digital c-print, 120 x 120 cm Courtesy of the artist and Cemeti Art House (Residency Project Landing Soon #7).

time, commercial galleries were not willing to show the works Cemeti was showing; but that is no longer the case, which has naturally hurt Cemeti's level of income.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, since 1998 quite a few artist-initiatives have been set up, to mention a few: ruangrupa in Jakarta ([www.ruangrupa.org](http://www.ruangrupa.org)), which organizes, among many other events, the bi-annual OK Video Festival; Platform3 in Bandung ([www.platform3.net](http://www.platform3.net)); and Mes56 in Yogyakarta ([mes56.com](http://mes56.com)).

Works shown in Cemeti, such as those by Tintin Wulia and Tromarama, can easily find venues elsewhere. Nonetheless, Cemeti might still be considered a prime site for artists to show their work: it offers an alternative for art criticism.<sup>16</sup> Art collector Oei Hong Djen asks for Cemeti's curatorial decisions to be made explicit,<sup>17</sup> but Cemeti already does this by making exhibitions. Cemeti presents not a text-based discourse, but an alternative, visual discourse manifested through exhibitions. And this can be criticized by others – a criticism that can be turned into different exhibitions made elsewhere – after all, a critical discourse requires counter-voices, or, in this case, counter-exhibitions.

Cemeti is the oldest artist-initiative space in Indonesia, which comes with privileges as well as responsibilities. Cemeti's privilege is that it's well connected within an international network, which is advantageous in an increasingly competitive donor environment. Ade Darmanwan, founder of ruangrupa, writes: “As a survival technique, the sustainability of funds [...] only make[s] sense when there are efforts to maintain the continuity of ideas.”<sup>18</sup> And it's exactly the sustainability of ideas, especially concerning the arts infrastructure, where Cemeti recognizes and takes its responsibilities. Cemeti is one of the founders of *Koalisi Seni* (Coalition for the Arts) to lobby the government to support the arts, and the initiator of *Forum Kurator Muda* (Young Curators Forum) to train, and provide opportunities for, young curators.<sup>19</sup> And as long as these ideas flow into exhibitions, Cemeti will live on.

**Cemeti Art House**  
Jalan D.I. Panjaitan no.41, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.  
[www.cemetiarthouse.com](http://www.cemetiarthouse.com),  
[25years.cemetiarthouse.com](http://25years.cemetiarthouse.com)

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### Notes

1 Winterson, J. 1996. 'Art Objects', *Art Objects, Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. London: Vintage Books, p.4. Winterson: “We hear a lot about the arrogance of the artist but nothing about the arrogance of the [potential] audience.” (p.14).

2 Throughout this essay I deliberately don't use 'Indonesian art', so as to avoid essentializing, anthropologizing and exoticizing art that is made here.

3 Supangkat, J. 2003. 'Art with an accent', *Interpellation, CP Biennale 2003 catalog*. Jakarta: CP Foundation, <http://bit.ly/VX1C1o> (accessed 3-2-13).

4 Voragen, R. 2012. 'Art Histories: The Aporias of Modernization in Southeast Asia', *Tempo Magazine*, pp.76-7. This is a review of 'The Gathering of Histories', an International Seminar on Art History and Visual Culture in Southeast Asia, at ITB's art school, Bandung, 12 November 2012. See <http://bit.ly/S61klK>.

5 Voragen, R. 2012. 'A right to art: a plea for an art museum in Indonesia', *C-Arts Magazine* 23, <http://bit.ly/LNBLQ2>.

6 [www.mellajaarsma.com](http://www.mellajaarsma.com); from 1-9-86 till 31-8-87, Nindityo Adipurnomo was a resident at the Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam.

7 <http://ivaa-online.org>; Farah Wardani is the director of IVAA, she did an internship at Cemeti Art House.

8 <http://kedaikibun.com/english>.

9 Interview with Tisna Sanjaya, 12 June 2012. Nindityo Adipurnomo and Mella Jaarsma, 'What are we waiting for', *Art Asia Pacific*, <http://bit.ly/SC1zBO> (accessed 13-1-13).

10 The exhibition, *Masa Lalu Masa Lupa*, showed work from R.E. Hartanto (who spent two years at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, where he was also my neighbor), Prilla Tania (recently completed a residency in Heden), Sunaryo (founded *Selasar Sunaryo Art Space* in 1998; [www.selasarsunaryo.com](http://www.selasarsunaryo.com)) and Tisna Sanjaya. Email 29-1-13.

11 Tintin Wulia studied in the US and Australia; her work often deals with the contingency of geopolitical borders. Email 7-2-13.

12 Ellert Haitjema, email 28-1-13.

13 Tromarama, email 28-1-13.

14 Jaarsma, M. 2003. '15 years Cemeti Art House, time for chewing the cud', *15 years Cemeti Art House, Exploring Vacuum*.

15 Cemeti isn't a commercial gallery; sales are made to facilitate program-making, not to make a profit. Jaarsma and Adipurnomo don't receive salaries; when Cemeti was still putting on monthly exhibitions they spent approximately 70% of their time there. Now that Cemeti focuses purely on residency programs, it is around 50%.

16 Situmorang, S. 2003. 'Wanted: Indonesian Art Critic(ism)', *15 years Cemeti Art House, Exploring Vacuum*.

17 Djen, O.H. 2003. 'Is painting marginalized in the era of contemporary art?' *15 years Cemeti Art House, Exploring Vacuum*, p.193. OHD Museum, his private museum, has come under scrutiny after some claim that some paintings (previously) owned by OHD are forgeries.

18 Darmawan, A. 'The Sustainability of Ideas', <http://bit.ly/11YxiO8> (accessed 5-2-13).

19 This forum is headed by curator Alia Swastika, who worked at Cemeti (2004-2008). She curated the Yogyakarta Biennale in 2011; the foundation supporting this biennale was co-founded by Cemeti.

