

# Afrizal Malna: techniques of writing and bodily encounters with urban space<sup>1</sup>

Afrizal Malna sits apart from many of Indonesia's contemporary poets. Not only is he a productive literary and theatre critic,<sup>2</sup> Afrizal has also written novels and collections of short stories. Afrizal, now in his mid-50s, is highly industrious: he writes around the clock, he travels regularly throughout Indonesia for seminars, readings and festivals, and when not working on a new collection of poems, he is revising older works, or having essays published in *Kompas*, a daily national newspaper. In 2012, Afrizal had residencies in Poland, at Platform Lublin, and at DAAD in Berlin. His most recently published book of poems is *museum penghancur dokumen*.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, he will return to Berlin for a year-long residency. During the 1980s and 1990s he was active with Teater Sae. For a period in the 1990s, he was affiliated with the activist group 'Urban Poor Consortium in Jakarta'. Despite this degree of activism, as a writer and poet, Afrizal remains relatively neutral in terms of Indonesia's often polarised literary communities.

Andy Fuller



The Poet

AFRIZAL'S VOICE AS A POET is distinctive from others who are also well-established in the modern Indonesian literary canon. He stands in contrast to the wildness and *joie-de-vivre* of Chairil Anwar (Afrizal though, also writes of his indebtedness to Anwar), the intellectualism of Goenawan Mohamad (to whom a poem is dedicated in his new collection – pointedly or not), the activism of the legendary late W.S. Rendra, the gentle romanticism of Sapardi Djoko Damono, the playful domestic scenes of Joko Pinurbo or the absurdity of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri. Afrizal, if such generalisations are relevant, is concerned not so much with the romanticism of a poet's loneliness, but with a questioning of language and a bodily engagement with public and private space, objects and their associations. It is through the appearance of everyday objects that Afrizal's poems emerge as a vital catalogue and repository of the cultural meanings of space and things in Indonesia's everyday contestable modernity. In an essay published in *museum penghancur dokumen*, Afrizal writes:

*in the triangle between language, body and space, the poems in this collection are like a net that leaves behind what can't be caught in the net; i.e. shadows from the aforementioned triangle: linguistic-shadows, bodily-shadows, spatial-shadows.(p.106)*

Afrizal's poems employ various strategies that evoke both a familiarity and a defamiliarisation with the objects of everyday life. His phrasing and grammar is often disarmingly simple. Yet, grammatical variation and poetic effect is achieved through idiosyncratic uses of words such as *tentang* [about], or *di antara* [in between]. Moreover, he will often times remove subjects from sentences. This presents problems for translation, but, also opens up a broadness of interpretation and meaning.

Afrizal's poems draw on the practices of surrealism and montage. Objects are placed in the same sentences as each other without any apparent correlation. In these cases *di antara*, or just *antara* [space between/among], is used. For example, in *Capung di atas pagar tinggi* [dragon fly on a high fence] he writes, "seperti ada bangkai yang terus dipuja dalam warna kelabu langit, kenangan di antara kacang hijau dan bunga matahari" [like there is a corpse that is continued

to be praised in the grey sky, memories amongst mungbeans and sunflowers] (p.12). And, in *Musik Lantai 16* [Level 16 Music], he writes, "senda-gurau antara koper dan puisi, antara gigi dan daging tersayat, sebuah orgasme yang membuat seluruh bahasa manusia terdiam" [laughter between suitcases and poetry, between teeth and sliced meat, an orgasm that silences all of mankind's languages]. 'In between' or 'amongst' is used as a device to create relationships between disparate objects, and between concrete and intangible nouns. Surrealism, as Ben Highmore argues, is something more than just a formal technique epitomised by the "chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella". But it is able to "attend to the everyday" through refusing to inhabit a separate realm between art and everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

Afrizal's sentences vary from being self-contained to those that are fragmentary and incomplete. And thus, he plays one sentence off against another. Afrizal writes in blocks of sentences, rather than flowing, linear narratives. They are repetitive and disconnected. This is a style of writing that embodies doubt in the language that he uses. Afrizal argues that he is 'uncomfortable' with language. And that despite being a poet, critic, novelist, he feels more at home with the discourses and practices of the visual arts.<sup>5</sup> He claims that Indonesian is his only language, but, that it is a language without a home; a language that rejects domestication. At his book launch for *museum penghancur dokumen*<sup>6</sup> he argued that Indonesian is his first language (and only language), but that it is not his mother tongue. Afrizal's frequent references to the soles of feet and to the palms, emphasise the importance of touch in his engagement with the space he occupies. He seeks to reclaim a kind of Indonesian language that is both questioning of its construction and grammar, as well as a language that draws on the body and physical experience, as opposed to bureaucratisation and staid formality.

Afrizal's poems often involve a fragmentary and multiple 'self': *saya* or *aku*. This first person presents the poetic discourse across various moments in time. *Saya* or *aku* is neither stable or reliable, but an entity that is diverse and problematic. Using these terms is a moment of contestation and negotiation. *Mesin penghancur dokumen*, for example:

"Ayo, minumlah. Tidak. Saya sedang es kelapa muda. [...] Saya tidak sedang nasi rames." [Go ahead, drink it. No. I'm being a young coconut juice. [...] I'm not being nasi rames.] (p.31) And, elsewhere, in *Aku Setelah Aku* [Myself after Myself],<sup>7</sup> the *aku* that is present is persistently problematic, never just 'aku', but always 'aku setelah aku' –as this self, or rather *these selves*, negotiate an encounter with a woman in an unnamed city, somewhere in Europe.

The concluding essay from *museum penghancur dokumen* articulates Afrizal's position regarding the first person. He writes,

*the first person has passed at the moment he writes. Writing is performed through changing the first person into the third person. I cannot write 'I' into time and space at the same time: the camera cannot photograph the camera, my eyes cannot see and gaze at myself at the same time. Writing only happens when 'I' has become 'him'.*"(p.102)

Nonetheless, *aku* and *saya* consistently appear throughout his poems. But, these are selves that are doubted and negotiated with the context of time (un-linear) and space in which 'aku' is a part.

The sense of an ambivalent imagining with Indonesian language is complemented by Afrizal's problematic relationship with Jakarta. The trajectory of modern Indonesian literature is inextricably linked to the processes of urbanisation and Afrizal's poems offer another variation on the ongoing exchange between urbanisation and the articulation of these changes through literary discourses. Afrizal's sense of disconnect with Indonesian is reflected in his realisation of the 'city' as a place that is not a site of 'return' in Indonesian literary discourse. He argues that to return never means to go home to a city. Although this statement is somewhat exaggerated and generalised, his point is that the city is most often imagined as a site of expectation, novelty and ambition. Afrizal, however, characterises his experience of Jakarta through the riots of the Malari incident (1974) and *reformasi* (May 1998). On the night of the Malari incident, Afrizal was woken by a member of the army as his home was searched for looters. It was at that moment that poetry became no longer a literary matter to him, but one of a "bodily engagement with space".<sup>8</sup>

Afrizal Malna's work as a poet spans some thirty years. His first collections of poetry *Abad yang Berlari* (1984), *Yang Berdiam Dalam Mikropon* (1990) and *Arsitektur Hujan* (1995) were written at the height of the Suharto-led New Order era. Until now, he has maintained a consistent style –which some regard as being uniquely 'afrizalian'. In my reading, this afrizalian style draws on the techniques of inscribing a fragmentary self, an engagement with language games in which various punctuation marks are absent and subjects or objects are removed or rendered ambiguous. His diction frequently draws on the ideas of what is 'stored', 'kept', 'held', 'preserved', 'retained' through the use of the word *menyimpan*. The poems are explorations of bodily engagements with his surroundings: those of domestic and urban spaces. References to the *telapak kaki* [sole] and *telapak tangan* [palm] recur frequently. Afrizal's practice of constructing poems from lists, from playing with uses of 'in between' and 'about' are other common traits. Afrizal's poems, however, cannot be reduced to these qualities and techniques. Through drawing on these practices, Afrizal's poems maintain a fine balance between consistency and variation, which asserts his distinctive poetic voice.

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## Notes

- All translations are by Andy Fuller
- See, for example, his books *Sesuatunya Indonesia: Esei-Esei dari Pembaca yang Tak Bersih* (Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 2000) and *Perjalanan Teater Kedua: Antologi Tubuh dan Kata*, Yogyakarta: iCAN, 2010)
- All page numbers for excerpts in this article refer to: Afrizal Malna. 2013. *museum penghancur dokumen*, Yogyakarta: Garudhawaca. [lit. document destroying museum]
- Ben Highmore referencing Comte de Lautréamont, in Highmore, B. 2002. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, Routledge, p.46
- Discussion with Afrizal Malna, 4 July 2013, Yogyakarta
- Cafe Lidah Ibu, Yogyakarta, 4 July 2013
- Afrizal Malna. 2013. 'Aku Setelah Aku', in *Aku Setelah Aku*, unpublished collection, p.11. This is a collection based on his travels and residencies in Europe during 2012 (Poland, Germany and France)
- Afrizal Malna. 'Kota di Bawah Bayangan Api', *Kompas*, 17 March 2013, p.20