

Mella Jaarsma

During the formative days of Indonesian contemporary art, a time when galleries did not support the avant-garde a young and potent creative duo unwittingly set about the change of the Indonesian art landscape. Driven by the need to exhibit their friends and their own artwork, in the front room of their rented house in Yogyakarta, Dutch artist Mella Jaarsma and her partner, Javanese artists Nindityo Adipurnomo in 1988 held the first art exhibition at the location they dubbed Cemeti Gallery.

In an era when a new and critical generation of dynamic Indonesian artists were being born from the art schools and academies Cemeti provided another interpretation of art as a painting orientated media, methods and aesthetics, and was an alternative to the state-run or business-bureaucrat commercial galleries.

From humble beginnings Cemeti evolved into an institution with a much broader vision than a gallery. Cemeti Art House (CAH), as it is known today, became a meeting venue of the outsider community and the vital center of production, display, and dialogue that has succeeded in shaping the international face of Indonesian contemporary art.

“Unfortunately,” Jaarsma says, “Modern Indonesian society is yet to appreciate the contributions that artists are making to the community. They don’t understand the power and strength art has to build the nation, national identity and pride. And while Indonesia seemingly heads into more turbulent social and political times, art becomes of greater importance because it encourages diversity, tolerance and cultural understanding.”

Now Cemeti has not only endured 27 years, yet is credited as the platform for success of many Indonesia’s foremost contemporary artists with their keen eye for promoting the artists abroad and the development of local art infrastructure. Cemeti organizes an array of workshops, courses, talks and lectures of local and global issues along with collaborative projects with international institutions and residency programs with a focus on strong public involvement.

Understanding the void created by the lack of young curators in the art scene specific programs focused on curators and art writers have been at the heart of CAH’s recent mission.

As a leading figure within the Indonesian art world Jaarsma has forged a path paralleled by few, let alone foreign or female artists. According to her peer, artist F.X. Harsono, during the mid 1980’s Jaarsma introduced a rational-analytical attitude in the background of her creative process seldom seen in the country. Born in Emmeloord, the Netherlands 1960, Jaarsma’s first introduction to Indonesia was in 1983 exposing her to a new found creative freedom that only occurs when stepping outside one’s known and familiar environment. Jaarsma studied visual art at 'Minerva' Academy, Groningen (1978 - 1984), after which she departed for Indonesia attending the IKJ (Art Institute of Jakarta) 1984, and at ISI (Indonesian Institute of Art) Yogyakarta, following this she remained, living in Yogyakarta, Central Java.

Jaarsma’s art has a unique creative “voice” which is easily identifiable within Indonesian contemporary art. Her work features strong ethnographic preferences and has led her on a never-ending cross cultural, socio-political journey into observation, analysis and response. Having been presented widely in Indonesia and in numerous international events, Jaarsma’s work is sourced by local and international museums, institutions and collectors. To her distinction Jaarsma along with her husband have been awarded The John D. Rockefeller 3rd Award, New York, USA 2006 and the Academic Art Award #2, Jogja Gallery / ISI Yogyakarta 2008.

An umbrella of Cemeti, the Cemeti Art Foundation in 1995 pioneered the Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), a data and resource center in Yogyakarta that has been an invaluable facility in the development of art infrastructure and in the promotion of Indonesian art.

CAH’s 2013 year long program of exhibitions and events celebrating 25 years of Cemeti, titled ‘Turning Targets’ was commemorated by the release of the book ‘Turning Targets – 25 Years of Cemeti’. Released in January 2015 the book “is a critical and reflective analysis of the ebbs and flows in Indonesian contemporary art practice and discourse.” It features essays written by 19 local and international identities including curators Enin Supriyanto, Alia Swastika and Malaysian Adeline Ooi who is now the director of Art Basel Hong Kong. Artists contributing include Moelyono and Melati Suryodarmo along with IVAA director Farah Wardani.



Mella-Jaarsma



Artwork by Mella Jaarsma



By Mella Jaarsma



Potong Waktu - Mella Jaarsma

Numerous images of events, people and artwork in the book, dating back to 1988 help describe the developmental journey of Cemeti and Indonesian contemporary art. Of special interest is a timeline list noting important Indonesian events that determine the country's social and political atmosphere and the response by the new wave of contemporary artists. The book launch was a multi-city event taking place in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Solo, Semarang and Surabaya.

Cemeti's journey has not been without trials including periods of critical wrath projected by those who saw Cemeti as "an agent of international trends" or its success being in part to Dutch foundation funding. Yet the most trying time was during the Indonesian contemporary art boom of 2008-2010 when many of the artists that they had supported became hot property in the market and when lucrative offers came from other galleries and dealers their loyalty was first to the money and last to Cemeti. "This was a time of great learning for us, both personally and collectively. Yet I never sway from my belief in the power of art and that it must always be fun while inspiring hard work."

Discussing some of the challenges Indonesian art is currently facing Jaarsma says, "Local galleries have not needed to develop international business models because up until recently they have been supported by a strong domestic market. Now a creative international business model is essential as the domestic market is suppressed and artists need promotion abroad to capture more of the growing international market." Making further observations she says, "In Indonesian I sometimes miss a constructive culture of self criticism, and therefor the value of self and collective analysis in both the culture and art is not being realized. Indonesia has enormous potential and much to offer on the international stage."

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