

Interview with Heri Dono

(Larry Polansky)

October 7th

Shinkansen Train from Harima to Kobe

The interview was conducted in a combination of English and Indonesian. Translations of Indonesian into English and explanations of Indonesian terms are in [brackets].

LP: Shall we?

HD: Yes!

LP: This is Larry Polansky, and Heri Dono on the Shinkansen from Harima to Kansai airport.

HD: About 8:30 in the morning.

LP: Sunday, October 6th. Heri, you just did an installation at the Harima Sounding Sphere Festival. Can you tell me a little bit about what you were trying to do with this work? Coba apa? [What were you attempting]?

HD: Saya setiap hari di Yogya, memakai sepeda, pergi kemana-mana dengan sepeda. Saya ingatkan kepada orang-orang, terutama di Harima, sebab Harima teknopolis, kota yang baru. Saya mengingatkan bahwa sepeda masih penting. [Everyday in Yogya, I use a bicycle, and I go everywhere with it. This makes me think of people, especially the people in Harima, because Harima is a "technopolis," a new city. I wanted to remind them that the bicycle is still important.]

LP: Sepeda adalah teknologi tua dan juga baru, ya? [The bicycle is an old technology as well as a new one?]

HD: Ya! Teknologi yang masih aktual sampai sekarang. [Yes, a technology that is still current today].

LP: Do you want them not to forget?

HD: Well, maybe people still remember, but probably, in this situation, sometimes there is the wrong perception of modernization. So there is no space for bicycles.

LP: And they still need bicycles?

HD: Yes!

LP: In your opinion, how did the people in Harima react to your installation?

HD: People accepted my work very well, not only the audience but the people who worked on the bicycle installation and the riders. Everybody, from children to older people liked trying the bicycles in the installation.

LP: Bagaimana kepentingan kolaborasi di dalam karya kamu? [What's the importance of collaboration in your work?]

HD: Kolaborasi seperti orang yang bermain-main dengan Internet, sangat penting sekali, dimana seniman atau manusia dari satu tempat bisa berkomunikasi dengan manusia di tempat lain. [Collaboration, like people playing together on the Internet, is very important, where artists or people from one place can communicate with people in another.] So, I want to use the conception of communal systems in my artwork.

LP: In your artwork and installation, you use your ideas, pikiran kamu [your thoughts], but it takes many people to make it. Do you consider them artists?

HD: Yes. I think that all people are artists. And also that all the members of the audience are artists, if they can participate, and not only look at the work.

LP: How does this relate to your feelings about ego?

HD: Well, we need ego, actually — we don't need to destroy our ego. But sometimes, like in Balinese ceremonies, if we look at the ceremony, the procession, there is a distance between us and the ceremony itself. But if we participate in the ceremony, our ego unites with it. We don't know who we are in that case. Collaboration is sometimes like that.

LP: I find that collaboration is a good way to put your ego to a good use.

HD: Yes, that's very important.

LP: Do you think that the way you work, with low technology, like bicycles, but a *lot* of labor, banyak pekerjaan, pekerjaan kecil-kecil [much work, and a lot of "small work"] — do you think that has something to do with you being Indonesian?

HD: Yes. I work with people who repair televisions or radio. Many people repair them in Indonesia.

LP: That's right, many people *can* do it in Indonesia.

HD: Because repairing is cheaper than buying a new one. In industrial countries, it's better to buy a new one because the repair is very expensive. So this phenomenon becomes part of my work, let's say, to ask people to join in this, to realize my ideas.

LP: What do they think of your work?

HD: Mereka bekerja untuk memperbaiki televisi dan radio, tapi, mereka, kalau bekerja dengan saya, mereka senang sekali sebab seperti main-main. Tidak seperti perkerjaan. [Their job is to repair televisions and radios, but when they work with me, they really like it because it is more like playing. It doesn't feel like work.] The idea is very simple, and for them it's not really difficult.

LP: Tell me about your evolution. Mulai sebagai pelukis, tapi sekarang jalan ke beberapa arah. [You began as a painter, but have gone in several directions.] How did that happen?

HD: Well, I tried to find two categories. One is innovation in art, innovation in the development of my art, and also to get inventiveness in my artwork. So in painting, it's more individual, like a private letter, and I can do what I want in a painting through my ego. So I can say that in painting I can be more innovative. It's the same as our cave ancestors, who already made 2-dimensional images through paintings. I need

something to invent, or to get something with a different medium, but the concept is like *wayang kulit* [Javanese shadow puppet plays] — there is not any division.

LP: Between...

HD: Between painting, music, sculpture.

LP: So your installation is like painting?

HD: My installation is to find another medium to express myself.

LP: How long have you been working in installations?

HD: Since 1982, in Parangtritis [Central Java], in environmental art.

LP: Add then you did the *Wayang Legenda* [Dono's work with shadow puppets of his own design, in which he uses local stories instead of classical Javanese ones, and makes many theatrical innovations], which I saw in Yogyakarta. That was a collaboration with musicians and others, but mostly as a painter or puppet maker?

HD: No. The *dalang* [puppet masters] were the sons of a famous *dalang* in Yogya. They were very surprised, because usually in traditional *wayang kulit*, the *dalang* is a leader, but we had a director to tell them what to do!

LP: Kapan Heri mulai *Wayang Legenda*? [When did you begin *Wayang Legenda*?]

HD: Di tahun 1987. Dan buat performance in 1988. [In 1987. And the performance was in 1988].

LP: Tahun berapa Mas Heri pertama kali jalan ke luar negeri? [When was the first time you travelled abroad?]

HD: 1990; ke Suisse. [1990; to Switzerland].

LP: Untuk apa? [What for?]

HD: Pameran di Museum für Völkerkunde. [An exhibition at the Völkerkunde Museum.]

LP: Masih lukisan? [Still showing paintings?]

HD: Masih lukisan dan exhibisi wayang. [Paintings and a shadow puppet exhibition.]

LP: Tetapi sekarang, kamu biasanya bekerja untuk instalasi, tidak sebagai pelukis. [But now, you work mostly in installations, not as a painter?]

HD: Sebab di Indonesia, ada "booming" tentang lukisan, commercialisi. Saya tidak begitu tertarik. Karena saya buat lukisan untuk kepentingan saya, bukan untuk kepentingan "consumer." [Because in Indonesia, the commercialization of painting is booming. I am not so interested in that. I make paintings for my own needs, not those of the consumer.]

LP: Many Indonesian artists are influenced by Heri Dono's style. How do you feel about that?

HD: Yeah, some people call this "Heri Dono-ism," like "He-donism" in English [laughs].

LP: That's great!

HD: To me this is good, this is culture — we have to share. I don't want to claim things, and say that other people cannot express themselves through this style. It belongs to everyone. It's like Balinese sculpture...

LP: It belongs to everyone. Where do you think your style comes from?

HD: Well, when I was a student in art school, I saw many European painters, like Paul Klee, Miro, Picasso, Kandinsky. So in the medium, I was influenced I guess. But at the same time I also did research about *wayang beber* —

LP: The Javanese wayang stories on painted scrolls?

HD: Yes, and also lukisan kaca [reverse glass painting, typically from Cirebon, in north west Java]. So I combined these media. Many European artists like Picasso and others were inspired by Henri Rousseau, and maybe Rousseau never studied at the academy. In Indonesia, there are a lot of artists who make glass paintings, but it is done without any names attached.

LP: Konsep kelucuan penting sekali di karya kamu. Tetapi bukan kelucuan "silly," melainkan kelucuan "serious." [The concept of humor is very important in your work, but it is serious humor, not silly.]

HD: In the Indonesian tradition, dance, theatre, or wayang kulit [Javanese shadow play], the Punakawan [clown-servants] are very important for criticizing and making fun of the high levels of society. Like in Ketoprak [Javanese folk theater], there are jokers, and they are central to the drama.

LP: And do you try to be a Punakawan?

HD: Something like that, yes.

LP: Is that why you wear your hair like Petruk [one of the popular clowns, whose hair is worn in a knot on top of his head]?

HD: [Laughing] Probably, I'm not sure.

LP: Which of the Punakawan are you?

HD: I don't identify with a specific Punakawan, but to criticize something in the context of my artwork, I need a way to make jokes.

LP: So with the bicycles, it's a gentle criticism of technology, not just in Japan but everywhere in the world. And especially in Harima, where there is *so* much high technology — incredible and amazing. How do you think you function as an artist in Japan?

HD: Saya adalangi orang Indonesia, tapi saya juga orang yang hidup dalam dunia yang internasional. Jadi saya milik dunia. Dan saya rasa sebagai mediator di dalam seni,

karena seni tidak hanya [I am an Indonesian, but I am also a person who lives in an international world. So I belong to the world. In art I feel I am a mediator, because art is not just concerned with] the concept of beauty, but is also meant to raise the consciousness of others.

LP: Ada fungsi khususyna untuk Heri Dono, atau untuk seniman Indonesia di dalam kebudayaan Jepang? [Do you and other Indonesian artists have a special function in Japanese culture?]

HD: Ya. Banyak sekali manfaat untuk saya. Banyak inspirasi, dimana ada beberapa kebudayaan hampir sama. Saya belajar dari kebudayaan Jepang — dari makanan, dari sake . . . [Yes. It has been very beneficial to me. There is a lot to be inspired by when there are several similar cultures. I learn from Japanese culture — from the food, from the wine . . .]

LP: Dari cerita? [From the stories?]

HD: Dari cerita juga. [From the stories also.]

LP: Di dalam karya kamu, memakai cerita Jepang? [Do you use Japanese stories in your work?]

HD: Ya. Dan juga di ICC — InterCommunication Center — di bawah NTT, mereka koleksi gamelan saya, nama gamelan “Gamelan of NCommunication” — Nomunication, di bahasa Japan, “nomu” artinya minum. drinking and communication! [Yes. Also, at the InterCommunication center beneath NTT, they have in their collection a gamelan work of mine, titled the “Gamelan of Communication” — or Nomunication. In the Japanese language, nomu means drink, so this combines drinking and communication!]

LP: Apa pendapat Mas Heri, terutama didalam wawancara ini untuk buku Festival Harima, tentang hubungan diantara Heri Dono dan Jepang di masa depan? [What is your opinion, specifically in the context of this interview for the Harima Festival book, about the future relationship between Heri Dono and Japan?]

HD: Hubungan saya dengan pameran di Harima ini dan dengan Jepang — untuk saya tidak hanya berhenti disini. Saya ada proyek dari saya sendiri namanya “Islands Project.” Saya tidak mengatakan bawah saya mewakili Indonesia dalam acara festival. Saya mungkin mewakili pulau Jawa, karena orang Indonesia karakternya berbeda-beda. Mungkin satu kali saya akan buat kontak antara pulau Okinawa di Japan dengan — [My relationship with the exhibition in Harima and with Japan does not stop here. I have my own project called the Islands Project. I do not say that I can represent Indonesia in the program for this festival. Maybe I can represent just the island of Java, because the Indonesian people have many different characters. Perhaps sometime I will make contact between the Japanese island of Okinawa—

LP: Kontak lewat apa? [How will you make contact?]

HD: Lewat Internet. [Through the Internet.]

LP: Tapi apa, menulis surat di Internet? [But how, by writing a letter on the Internet?]

HD: Secara semiotic, kita mau mencari kebudayaan-kebudayaan yang ada hubungan. seperti dengan orang Maori [indigenous peoples of New Zealand], banyak sekalih kata-kata yang sama dengan... [In semiotic terms, we want to look for cultures that are related, for example, with the Maori people, there are many words that are the same —]

LP: Di antara bahasa Maori — [between the Maori language —]

HD: ...dan di Bahasa Indonesia. Saya mau cari hubungan lagi dan buat seni lewat teori yang semiotik. [— and Indonesian. I want to find other relationships and make art according to semiotic theories.]

LP: Menarik sekali! Apa lagi? [Very interesting! What else?]

HD: Yang lain lagi adalah, bawah saya melihat Harima, untuk sepuluh tahun yang akan datang. Memang saya datang tidak ada orang di Harima, masih sepi, tapi visi saya melihat akan menjadi kota yang besar. [It is another thing if I look at Harima ten years from now. Indeed, when I came to Harima there were hardly any people, it was very quiet, but I can envision that this will become a large city.]

LP: Sibuk. [Busy.]

HD: Kota yang sibuk. Mungkin kalau saya umurya masih panjang mungkin saya akan buat kontak lagi dengan karya yang berbeda. Yang juga penting untuk saya dan juga penting untuk orang Jepang. [A very busy city. Maybe if I live a long time I can make contact again with another work, one that is important to me as well as to the people of Japan.]

LP: Ok! Thank you. Finished?

HD: Finished.

LP: Enough?

HD: Yeah, enough!