



SURVIVOR

DADANG
CHRISTANTO

foreword

Kultour, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (4A) and Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) are delighted to have the opportunity to partner on the presentation and tour of this dynamic project to six regional galleries in three states across Australia. As organisations that value high quality arts experiences for diverse communities, we are thrilled to be bringing work of this calibre and complexity to regional audiences.

Curated by 4A's Director, Aaron Seeto, *Survivor* is a seminal work by contemporary Indonesian-Australian artist Dadang Christanto that reflects upon human survival; what it means to endure tragedy and loss, and the power of hope and unity. Through performance, video and photography, *Survivor*: Dadang Christanto exemplifies how art can convey a highly emotive and moving message.

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art has made to contemporary art discourse occurring within the Asia-Pacific region, positioning Australia and its diaspora communities as a critical voice in that dialogue. Through touring *Survivor*, Kultour and M & G NSW seek to challenge assumptions of what constitutes Australian art and in doing so broaden such definitions to include diverse cultural perspectives and approaches to art-making that are reflective of our multicultural community.

Georgie Sedgwick
Program Manager
Kultour

Michael Rolfe
CEO
Museums & Galleries NSW

survivor

*'Survivor is not merely about the mud tragedy in East Java... Survivor speaks for those who can no longer speak about their suffering. It is about human tragedy anywhere, everywhere.'*¹

Since 2006, the Sidoarjo Region of East Java has been slowly covered in rising waves of mud. Washing away homes, schools, places of worship, paddy fields and factories. The unrelenting build up of mud in the region is making villages slowly vanish – burying the entire history of a village, its livelihood and future beneath mud. Since the beginning of this disaster in May 2006 there has been continuing discussion as to the exact source of the mud. In one camp it is suggested that the mud slide is a natural disaster, on the other, gas exploration and man's intervention within the natural environment is to blame. Whoever and whatever is to blame, entire villages have disappeared. The mud has subsumed histories, and the future for many people is uncertain.

Much of Dadang's work, his paintings, sculptures and performances have very directly engaged with the disappearance of his father during the political purges of the Suharto regime in Indonesia. But it would be difficult to define Christanto's work as being political. Instead, his performance work requires the participation of individuals, and more often strangers, who through their action bring to the fore an emotive response to trauma. In one of Christanto's other key performances *Litsus*, first performed in 2003 with his son (who was then the same age as Christanto, when his father disappeared), Dadang and his son, sit silently, as an audience is invited to throw flour bombs at the artist, to participate in a type of public shaming or humiliation.

¹ Mirna Indra in conversation with Dadang Christanto, unpublished.

Caroline Turner, describes this feeling in her analysis of this work:

In ...*Litsus*, Dadang Christanto recalls ... the stigma attached to the families of those who disappeared, their lack of security, the fact they could never publicly speak of the dead or disappeared and of the complicity of all in that silence as the audience is made complicit during the performance. Either by standing by or by actively participating in violence.²

Survivor demands similar things of its audience; a simple action that requires deep contemplation. This work was first performed in 2008 in Jakarta with the Urban Poor Linkage (UPLINK), a Non-Government Organisation in Indonesia. This first performance involved 400 participants and volunteers covered in mud, in a public space. Subsequently, in 2009, it was performed in Australia for the first time at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. *Survivor* is a silent memorial, not only to the victims of this particular disaster, but a memorial to acts of unspeakable violence and trauma, a poetic gesture about human violence and its consequences. In *Survivor* volunteers stand with the artist, silently covered in mud from the neck down, holding a photographic portrait. It is an act in which to memorialise those lives fractured, lost or displaced as a result of tragedy. Silence is, thus, an attempt to suppress anger and define helplessness. In each venue, its corps changes and with new volunteers and new faces, the silence slowly spreads it reach. New individuals continue to bring to the performance their own meditation on silence.

The mud has been something of a preoccupation for many Indonesian artists who live in and away from Indonesia. Christanto's interest in the mud disaster emerges from previous bodies of work that deal with the trauma of his father's disappearance during the political purges of the Suharto regime in Indonesia. But his work transcends the cultural and political specificity of this time in Indonesian modern history. Instead the artist, through performance, through the interaction and reliance on volunteers and strangers, opens up a different space where we might reflect upon our shared experiences in the face of human struggle. Implicated in this silence, is us, the viewers, an audience who by being confronted with the wall of silence becomes implicated as a participant. *Survivor* is powerful in its ability to implicate, and powerful in its ability to make us think about both compassion and action. It evokes absence and loss, and raises questions of responsibility. Christanto's work gives voice to the tragedy of lives perished and the silent suffering of the survivor.

Aaron Seeto
Curator

² Caroline Turner, *Security and Human Rights*, no date, page 4.
www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/FutureTense/caroline.pdf
[accessed 23 February, 2012]

What should be humanity's right: the art of Dadang Christanto

The art of Dadang Christanto has constantly provoked questions of the conscience while pushing the boundaries of conventional practice. His early explorations in the mid 1980s were central to the development and direction of installation and performative art in Indonesia and took on highly charged themes pertaining to local socio-political injustices. Christanto's art has remained firmly anchored to these early beliefs in social justice, the plight of ordinary people and ultimately the rights of all humanity. Yet, since the early 1990s he has not only spoken of localised and personally poignant enquiries but eloquently imbued work with multiple readings, inviting audiences to react on both universal and intensely private levels. His art from this time has received critical recognition for its exceptional power to transcend cultures and specific references to evoke reflections on universal human suffering and communal grief.

Prior to his move to Australia in 1999, Christanto was already one of Indonesia's most prominent artists, both locally and on the international stage. Along with performance he was best known for his large-scale installations employing multiple representations of the human body. Some of these installations comprised entire figures, where others featured dismembered body parts, internal organs or metaphoric forms to speak of injustices suffered by the voiceless many.

The years just subsequent to his migration mark a turning point for Christanto. Where prior works can be interpreted as relating to historical events in Indonesia, since this time his expressions have resonated on a far more explicit personal note, with the artist openly remarking on their import to his own father's disappearance during the Indonesian massacres in 1965.

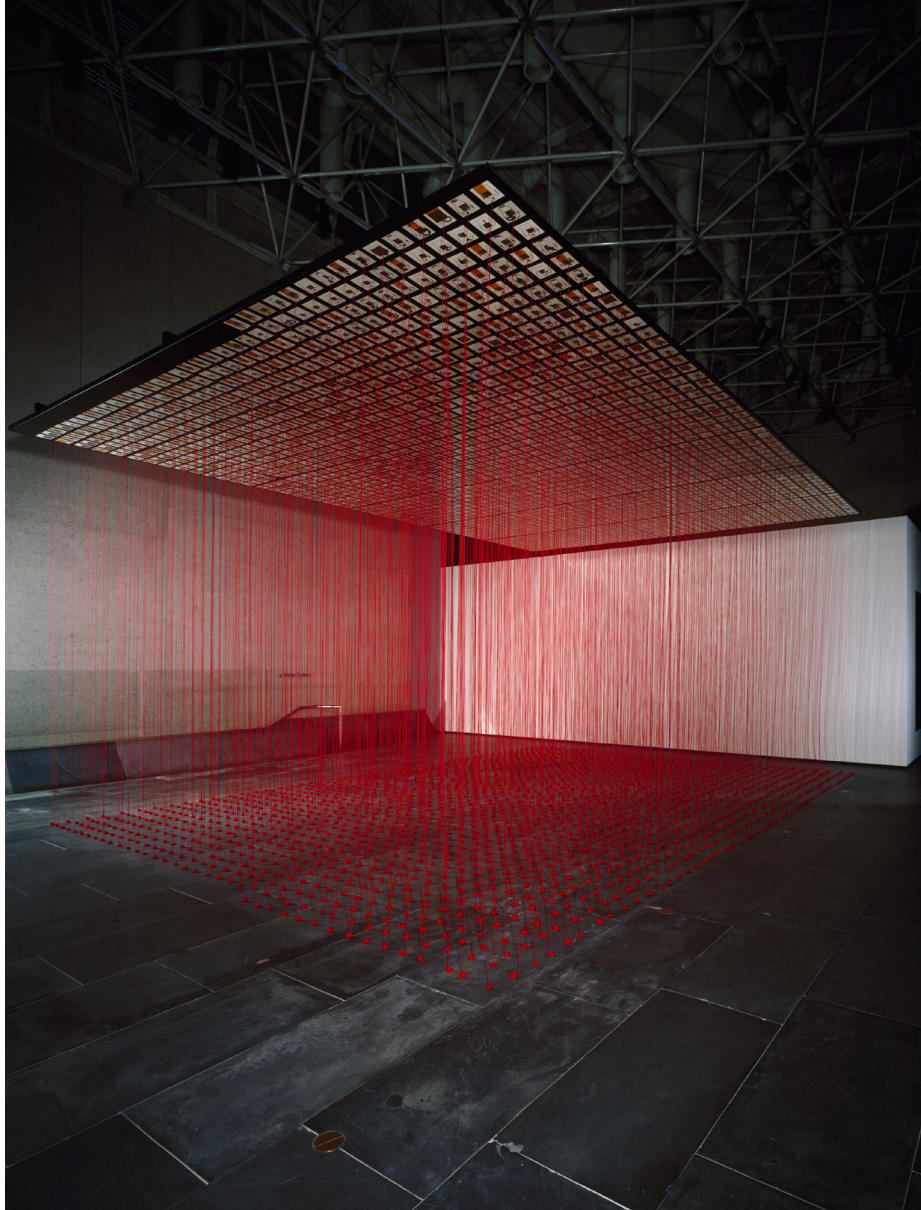
It was a culmination of various events that prompted Christanto's personal reassessment and the commencement of his first series, the Count Project in 1999. There was the move to a different country, which perhaps promoted an awareness of his autonomy and distance, the media and public hype surrounding the forthcoming millennium celebrations (with little reflection on the previous century's bloodied actions,) along with the daily barrage of television footage from the East Timor referendum. The charge of the Count Project – to count the forgotten victims of systematic violence – is of course immense, if not impossible, and the enormity of the task is evoked by the style Christanto employs to portray these victims. The paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations depict single or multiple dismembered heads. These images appear to be rendered hurriedly and as if driven by a raw instinctive energy which alludes to the project's sheer magnitude. Through this process of repetition Christanto endeavours to provide a presence for all the absences in officially sanctioned history and his own memory, using this series as a cathartic and meditative means to heal wounds and physically place his father in history.

In addition to numerous works on paper and canvas, Christanto has created several major installations within the *Count Project*. The first major installation was *Hujan Merah* (Red Rain 1999- 2004), a monumental piece now part of the National Gallery of Australia's collection. *Hujan Merah* is a ceiling-mounted installation comprising 1965 single heads

Dadang Christanto

Red rain (*Hujan merah*) 2003
National Gallery of Australia, Can-
berra

Gift of Gene and Brian Sherman
2003. Yarn generously supplied by
Cleckheaton Hand Knitting Yarns,
Australia



drawn on laminated joss paper with red strands of string hanging from each of the victims' foreheads, The work presents a sky of seemingly countless heads with the strands forming blankets of red rain/blood that pool on the gallery floor. Aside from referencing events in Indonesia in 1965-66, the work speaks of the discrimination and persecution ethnic Chinese have historically faced in Indonesia through the small laminated drawings echoing official Indonesian identity cards and the use of joss paper.¹ While *Hujan Merah* is graphically confronting like several other works in this series, it also evokes an overwhelming impression of solace for the victims. Its high 'floating' placement on the ceiling, the blurring of image details due to viewing distance, along with the stillness and solemnity of its installation invoke an ethereal quality.

Out of the Count Project came a major series of tree works, though, from the mid 2000s Christanto worked on both series simultaneously. The choice of the tree, itself a powerful symbol across various cultures and religions, is undeniably a more optimistic symbol when compared to that of the victim and makes use of lyrical iconography to present a more reflexive expression to trauma. The image of the tree is employed by Christanto as the symbolic keeper of memories: the living witnesses to the events which caused the 'disappearance' of his father and countless others. He explains 'In my imagination, I walk in the forest collecting leaves. The trees and leaves of the forest have seen what happened and are witness to the mass graveyards.'² A major public work in the tree series is *Witness* (2004) which stands in the Australian National University's Sculpture park in Canberra.

Both these series speak fluently to others, of their personal lives and universal concerns. They can nonetheless be seen as a means to heal; cathartic responses to recovering and reclaiming hidden histories of personal significance. While remaining unfalteringly moored in the human experience, from the mid 2000s Christanto's inspirational base has

widened. This includes the devastation inflicted by the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, and the disaster in the Sidoarjo region in East Java in 2006, which saw mud flowing from a gap-drilling borehole, befittingly and tenderly examined in the performance *Survivor*, seen at Gallery 4A in Sydney, 2009.

In more recent years Christanto has unquestionably taken a 'softer' approach in his journey. In 2005 he stated it was 'very tiring to continue to speak of life with themes related to the wounds of a generation.'³ Even though many of his new works demonstrate gentler and, perhaps, more soothing approaches, their underlying nuances remained barbed. For instance, whereas the poetic *Mountain Series* from 2010 immediately invokes a multitude of symbolic and poetic references, it also recalls the Count Series with small dots on the mountain forms denoting the heads of countless victims.

For over three decades Dadang Christanto's art has influenced the direction of contemporary art practice, particularly in Indonesia. For his other home of Australia, he has provided a complexity and richness to artistic discourse - a powerful, resounding voice offering a distinct interpretation on contemporary practice. As artist and world-citizen, Christanto constantly reminds us that we are human, and invites us to take time, reconsider our core beliefs and compassionately reflect on the lives of all others.

Christine Clark is Manager Exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery and has written considerably on Dadang Christanto

¹ These identification cards stated if one was of Chinese descent. Consequently this classification caused cases of racial discrimination towards Indonesians of Chinese descent.

² Dadang Christanto, interview with Peter Denham, 19 March 2005, in Christine Clark (ed.) *Echoes of Home: Memory and Mobility in Recent Austral-Asian Art*, Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane City Council, 2005, p. 36

³ Dadang Christanto, interview with Suara Merdeka, 17 July 2005, in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds) *Wounds in our Heart*, Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, 2010, p.17







about museums & galleries nsw

Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) supports a dynamic mix of museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres in both metropolitan and regional areas throughout the state. With a primary focus on the small to medium sector, M&G NSW generates services that improve program performance, capacity, sustainability & networking across the sector, and seeks to advocate and communicate the value of sector wide programs and activities to stakeholders and communities. Our values and influences centre on ensuring that galleries, museums & Aboriginal cultural centres are able to reflect, contest, involve and support their communities in a variety of ways.

As part of the National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS Australia network), M&G NSW is committed to the delivery of best practice touring exhibitions of contemporary visual culture to remote and metropolitan communities throughout NSW and Australia. M&G NSW also offers in-kind touring support across areas such as crating and transport management, condition reporting and conservation, resource and program development, marketing, workplace health and safety, and risk assessment

Museums & Galleries NSW is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW and by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

about kultour

Kultour is a national member-based organisation that advocates for greater representation of diverse cultural perspectives in the arts in Australia. It provides a range of services to the arts community and supports the mobility of high quality arts practices, representing Australia's contemporary multicultural society, to wide and diverse audiences. Established in 2001 by the Australia Council for the Arts, Kultour supports intercultural and cross-cultural arts projects and dialogue through partnerships with the arts and non-arts sector.

Kultour has developed a vast number of contemporary touring exhibitions to metropolitan, regional and remote locations in its nine year history, developing strong audiences for the work of culturally diverse Australian artists.

Kultour is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body, as an initiative of the Arts in a Multicultural Australia policy.

about 4A centre for contemporary asian art

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art is Australia's peak national body for contemporary Asian art and cultural thinking. It is a highly regarded pioneering organisation that fosters excellence and innovation in contemporary Asian and Australian culture through research, documentation, development, discussion and presentation of contemporary visual art. 4A believe that Asian cultural thinking will have an important impact on the future. 4A's aim is to ensure contemporary visual art plays a central role in understanding the dynamic relationship between Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

4A occupies a unique position in the Australian contemporary art world and in the contemporary art discourse of the Asian region. Its position is based on its long-term focus on living Asian cultures (as opposed to traditional arts); its support of Asian-Australian artists; its close relationship with artists; its curatorial innovation and commitment to excellence and its program that leads the national discussion of the Asian-Australian context.

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