

Grand Parade

A unique art installation by Jompet Kuswidananto

Dates

31 October 2014 – 22 March 2015

Concept

Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto will make a unique presentation of his famous groups of parade figures specially for the Great Hall of the Tropenmuseum. Rather than a retrospective exhibition of individual works, it is a new art installation, conceived of as one dynamic whole.

The installation will offer a stage to an assembly of the life-size mechanical figures, for which Jompet has become well known. These figures are modelled on the groups found in the Indonesian public domain, in festive, ceremonial or political parades. Each group of figures wears costumes and carries musical instruments, loudspeakers and other props that give expression to their group identity. At certain times, Jompet's figures come into action: hands begin to clap, instruments begin to play, loudspeakers produce the sound of voices.

Brought together in one grand installation, Jompet's mechanical figures manifest how different groups meet in a shared societal space.

The core theme in Jompet's work is the way in which different, sometimes even contradictory beliefs and values are negotiated in society. His direct source of inspiration is the island of Java, with its history of continuous transition – between Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity; between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial regimes; between agrarian and industrial or urban culture; between mystical and scientific belief systems. Rather than regarding incoming influences as alien, synthesizing beliefs and values became the very fuel of this culture.

Jompet's observations are grounded in Java, but they are also relevant to culture in a more general global context. Culture, Jompet suggests, involves a continuous process of absorbing and reconciling contradictory beliefs, customs and influences. Like culture in general, Jompet's figures are therefore assemblages, composed of different elements.

Cultural negotiation can be playful and pleasant, but also conflictual and threatening. Jompet's installation will articulate these differences by staging three different groupings of figures in one shared space. One group is based on community carnival parades, for which people playfully invent a different identity for themselves each year. Another group is based on Javanese royal armies, with uniforms that bear conflicting traces of Javanese and colonial histories. A third group is based on political demonstrations, where cultural negotiation becomes contestation, as different groups compete to make their voice heard.

Involving the public

For the Grand Parade installation a theatrical environment will be built in the Tropenmuseum's Great Hall, which evokes the impression of a public square, complete with street furniture.

Corrugated iron walls act as backdrops, but also choreograph the movement and sight lines of the visitor. They guide the visitor to a position in the centre of the installation, amidst the parade groups. This creates a situation where the viewer is not merely looking at the installation, but is directly addressed and implicated.

The three groups

Three different groups of figures encounter each other in the Tropenmuseum's Great Hall. They each represent a different position people take in the dynamics of an ever-changing culture and society.

1. Carnival groups

The entrance to the exhibition will be formed by a line of horse figures, wearing costumes and holding other props used in parades. The horses lead the viewer to the first group of human figures dressed in costumes that are playful assemblages of different cultural references, such as turbans that mimic a Mogul style. A number of figures appear to walk on stilts, towering above the others. The figures are modelled on community carnival parades, which change style and costume each year, light-heartedly

imitating and incorporating whatever is fashionable or current – freely borrowing elements from politics, religion or pop culture. These festive, ever-changing parade groups, Jompet says, provide an impression of the form culture takes at a certain time.

2. Royal army groups

This twofold group of orderly arranged human figures are dressed in military uniforms, carrying drums and arms. The uniforms, inspired by the actual uniforms of Yogyakarta's royal army, bear mixed references to both the dress of the Javanese Sultanate and the military attire of the Dutch colonial army (KNIL). Java's royal soldiers lost their military function in the 19th century, when the Dutch firmly established colonial rule. But their purely symbolic status, Jompet says, can be seen as a cultural tactic. The army uniform was redesigned, and various cultural symbols, including references to Hinduism, Islam, the West and local traditions, were collaged as a defence mechanism against the idea of one dominant culture and value system.

3. Activist groups

The heads of the figures in this section are covered with T-shirts and they are carrying shovels, loudspeakers and flags, which gives them a more threatening appearance than the other groups. They are modelled on the activist demonstrations in which people exercise their right to express their voice in the public domain. T-shirts are commonly worn by street workers to protect themselves from the sun and dust, but political groups have adopted them to safeguard their anonymity and to protect themselves from tear gas. Some of the figures are assembled in a lorry – which is not only a common vehicle for transporting groups of people, it has also become a standard unit with which the press indicates the number of people that have been mobilized for a particular cause.

A line of motorbikes completes this section (mirroring the line of horses that form the entry to the installation). They carry a cloud of flags imprinted with the texts of political songs from the last 30 years. The noise of roaring and honking motorbikes is a tool often used by political groups to manifest their presence and power in the public domain. For Jompet, it is also a symbol of the way in which the democratic right to exercise one's voice may lead to a cacophony of voices, each aiming to be the loudest. Jompet articulates the violence of this kind of political contestation of different beliefs and values with the opposite of a loud cacophony: this group is ominously silent.

Biography

Jompet Kuswidananto (born in 1976 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia) is a visual artist as well as a member of the theatre collective Teater Garasi. His work has been shown widely, for example in Taipei, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Bangkok, Seoul, Mumbai, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Melbourne, Moscow, London (Saatchi Gallery), Lyon, Oslo, Karlsruhe (ZKM) and Utrecht (*Beyond the Dutch*). Jompet's installations can be found in the collections of the Singapore Art Museum; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Akili Museum of Art, Jakarta; and Kardis Art Foundation, San Francisco.

Lenders of individual works that make up the Grand Parade installation

Ark Gallery, Jakarta

Akili Museum of Art, Jakarta

Leo Shih, Taipei

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne