

# Symbol, Spirit, Culture

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In questioning *world art*, *international art*, and *global art* (now, issues in the development of contemporary art), the view espoused by Naturalist Theory is actually the most neutral and agreeable. Naturalist theory considers art as a universal symptom central to human life, and therefore it can be found in all cultures in all eras, though their manifestations may differ from one culture to another, from one era to the next. Naturalist theory sees art phenomenon as a natural occurrence of art sensibility in humankind.

Naturalist theory is yet to be substantially employed in discussions about world art, international art, and global art issues. Rather, these issues are dominated by historicist theory, essentialist theory, and contextualist theory. Unlike naturalist theory, these three theories look at art as a historic phenomenon. An understanding of art, as conceived by these three theories, hinges upon the historical understanding of art as developed in the West.

Such conviction creates a problem in world art, international art, and global art inquiries because in the non-Western world, art-as-a-cultural-phenomenon is only examined through the study of anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology, using a set of completely different methods. To this day, none of these studies really examine art as a distinct symptom / indication within cultural inquiries. Prior to the 1980s (the fall of modernism), there was no opportunity to conduct a comparative study, because they were placed opposite of each other: on the one hand was art thinking that sought universal truth—art history and art philosophy—, and on the other hand was a school of thought dedicated to diverse cultures.

In the development of contemporary art, the underlying cultural criticism—a resistance within society rising against the hegemony of rational thought—has pushed culture to the forefront, inducing the formulation of (specific) questions about art. This shift has inspired attempts to draw together thoughts on art and thoughts on diverse ethnic cultures. This could already be seen in 1989 at the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris. Most recently, it was revisited in 2000 as an attempt to engage in a discourse on intercultural aesthetics. These attempts failed due to the pervasiveness of deeply-rooted beliefs/convictions.

Today we try to once again reconnect thoughts about art with thoughts about diverse cultures by using a heretofore overlooked approach. This approach travels the long way around, i.e. through a sort of comparison involving an examination into the history of art.

This comparison finds a similarity between the art sensibility that informed the development of art in the West up to the 19th century, on the one hand, and the art sensibility found within diverse ethnic traditions (even today), on the other. At the heart of it is a similar art sensibility, i.e. an art sensibility that serves as a vehicle for humanity to experience the strength and might of nature, deities and the Almighty. This art sensibility may present an aesthetic experience that, together with religious sentiment, occupies a metaphysical realm. In short, this art sensibility existed, and continues to exist, in service of religion.

It is also an incontrovertible and universal symptom, that this sort of aesthetics—especially in the form of beauty—is also used by the rulers, heads of religious institutions, feudal lords, and the affluent part of society to show how they are much closer to the gods or God than the rest of society. History shows that religion and this art sensibility (in the form of secular beauty) have been used to ‘deceive’ the religious/devout lower classes. This phenomenon of power exists equally in the West and the East.

In the West, however, there was a civil uprising in the 19th century, as the disenfranchised demanded their rights. Expanding upon the ideas and thoughts on art sensibility that had been developing since the 16th century, philosopher GWF Hegel (1770- 1831) used this uprising as the background/platform to introduce his thinking that art sensibility also embodies capacities other than to serve religion.<sup>1</sup>

Through a comparative study, we can see how instances of such a rebellion cannot be found in other cultures. Thus, the role of art sensibility, in other cultures, remains unchanged. In these cultures, art still celebrates collective/shared values that are still connected, either indirectly or directly, to religion. This sort of art sensibility leaves no room for subversive views/thoughts.

Hegel introduced an art sensibility spectrum—he stated that there's no longer a singular art sensibility as previously believed. In the development of art in the West (after the 19<sup>th</sup> century), this sort of art sensibility might play a role in presenting, amongst others, expressions related to social movements (romanticism), socialist ideologies (realism), and the development of scientific knowledge (impressionism).

It is also an undeniable reality that Hegel's breakthrough has become the basis of art development in other cultures around the world after the 19th century. Taking this reality into account, an awareness of this art sensibility spectrum is truly the common ground and *raison d'etre* of world art, international art, and global art. We have no other choice, because a similar breakthrough cannot be found elsewhere in the world. Therefore, it is

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<sup>1</sup> See Common Ground in Global Art

impossible to compare, on the one hand, the developments of world art, international art, and global art that are based on an art sensibility spectrum, with art practices of other cultures that are based on the opposite conviction (i.e. a singular art sensibility). This is the root of the failure suffered by *Magiciens de la Terre* and intercultural aesthetics.

In the development of modern art until the 1970s, Hegel's breakthrough—that had freed art sensibility from its singularity—seemed to be in vain. Belief in an absolute truth made the plurality of art sensibilities into a catalyst of competing thoughts, each attempting to return art sensibility to its original singular form and definition. Essentialist theory attempted to uphold its conviction about the essence of art sensibility using the signs found in the development of art history. Contextualist theory (anthropology of art, sociology of art) attempted to make the absolute connection between art sensibility and socio-cultural issues.

Contemporary art development marked the end of this 'battle of theories'. Thoughts arguing for art sensibility's absolute singularity gave way to those that believe in plurality, an instance where reality is not a monolithic substance but rather a nuanced/layered substance. With this new viewpoint, we can surmise how all competing thoughts that had emerged during modern art development were actually questioning the different layers of art sensibilities all along, and that all of them might be properly regarded as art sensibilities. In contemporary art, we can easily witness the awareness of there being a spectrum of art sensibilities.

With the disappearance of such battles in the face of this new awareness, Hegel's breakthrough—i.e. the awareness of there being an art sensibility spectrum—should no longer be regarded as a contention between singularity and plurality. The shift in context and a new awareness of the existence of this spectrum of art sensibilities, can help us build an awareness of there being a spectrum [even] in the art sensibility that celebrates religion or other spiritual beliefs. Taking this awareness into account, naturalist theory with its vast scope—so vast that it never seems to discuss anything—is now something that merits attention. In questioning world art, international art, and global art, there are no longer boundaries that can stop us from fully observing the interaction of art sensibilities in diverse cultures.

### **Stereognosis of Contemporary Art**

Journeying through this sensibility is found best when explored through the metaphorical steps of stereognosis test. The stereognosis test is a test ran to investigate the palpability of a being. The test examines capability of a person to take in information of an object, identify them, and possibly reacting to them – a proses similar to how those sensible to art go through the process of 'consuming' art.

Recognizing the lack of capacity for cultural sensitivity and the impaired significance to 'feel', those unfamiliar with art would come up with questions "how do I react to this?" "How am I supposed to feel?" Therefore the repulsion "What kind of art is this?" Or "Is this even art?" These are examples of expressions demanding fixed and superficial answers upon encounters with contemporary art. The puzzled audience insensitive to visual culture has been disarmed entirely retracting back only to their most familiar definition of art.

In the time of contemporary art, to learn visual culture is not the same as having the privilege of being able to "consume" art in the times of modernism. We have arrived in an epoch where floodgates are raised up opening chances for everyone to access, we are no longer anchored – spoon fed by mystification and claims made by notable art experts to determine which art is the 'great' piece of art. Rather, the art and its symbolism has been democratized allowing them to address wide varieties of theme and issues in the livelihood of men and all the scales it entails. The visual code from visual culture then accommodates how the symbols is put into action. In an attempt to address the problem of lack of cultural sensitivity we must then underline the impact one can acquire as Kindler (2003, pp290) stated below.

*I have tried to rationalize the importance of visual culture in the educational enterprise on the basis that it provides a very fruitful ground for development of visual intelligence because of the richness of pictorial repertoires that it embraces. I see visual culture as central to visual education, a cognitive endeavor that would encourage a more complete and engaged participation in the visual world than what art education champions today.*

So what is visual culture and why does it matter?

*Visual culture is turning into some-thing of a growth industry in the academy. There is a variety of sources for this change: photographic historians broadening their perspectives; media critics wanting to expand their horizons; art historians alert to the elitism of their tradition and interested in the convergence of art history and design studies in a new field more relevant to their students. Apparently broader than the study of fine art, photography or film studies, this new discipline attracts scholars and student looking for that wider hermeneutic perspective on a wider range of subjects. - (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, pp385)*

Visual culture grants the criticism of realizing what has been going on around us visually and how they document signs of mutation, progress, and sedimentation of culture. We are formed, based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1990, p53) latest term of *Habitus in 1990* – to rephrase and put it simply, by what we witnessed and experience in the past creating a 'structured structures' where all our dispositions in everything we do are conducted without the need of any further conductor. Or to put it in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972): predominantly our ways of seeing is governed and decided by what we know and what we believe.

## **Touching Symbols**

So how does, analogically, the synthesizing process of culture produced symbolism? A famous cave painting in Lascaux, France, showed depiction of animals encountered by the prehistoric dweller. Their drive to imprint such imaginings on the cave walls might had had come from the fact that a good hunt was dreamt of, it might have also been a symbol of respect given to imposing, life threatening, animals. The Egyptians built Pyramid as a symbol of representation to their religious idea while the Persians adapted their version of manticore (comparable to Egyptian Sphinx) when Alexander the great conquered them.

These are all symbols built on purpose, the Egyptian built a bone-breaking, life-consuming homage to Gods while the Catholics spent endless time crafting and perfecting their decoration in gigantic and mesmerizing 'chieza' (church) and 'basilica' (cathedral) this was all done to project a symbol of faith. Hegel in his attempt to understand this, stated that the way of looking at symbol is analogical. As noted by Di Summa-Knoop (2013) that, the relation between the appearance of the symbol and its meaning is related to the immediate impression it creates; in her writing she used the lion as a depiction of power and strength.

The reading capability relating to the visual intelligence that visual culture entails is not as simple as in the example above, especially in the case of contemporary Asian art. As far as symbols and visual languages are concerned, it is inescapable - in the study and the reading of symbols utilized by contemporary Asian artists – that their voice is required in explaining the contextualism behind the elected mode of communication. Di Summa-Knoop had the luxury of presenting lion as a direct representation of strength and power due to the fact that it has been so in the rich tradition of European royal coat of arms, insignias, and emblazonment of protective armors. Then what of the Asian shared representation of power and strength? A tiger the Chinese saw as hard-willed and patient, a phoenix that the Vietnamese look up to as a heavenly majestic symbol, or perhaps a dragon which the European associate to the idea of demonism for so long? It is hard to pinpoint one symbol that applies to all, as there are contexts and different realities from each culture.

It was in the state of such uncertainty such as above, opting to utilize which mode of 'seeing' to the symbol reading become difficult. In Stereognosis, this would be the phase of

touching and remembering textures, appearances, or in art work remembering its aura, shape, externalities, sound and smell (if any). Blohm (1995, p9) wrote that a personal experience with contemporary art is imperative to the start of aesthetic learning – pinpointing the contextual spot of what makes something beautiful is inseparable to local issues and culture. This is a hint to the question *how am I supposed to feel?* Which was posed earlier.

The Japanese artist Emiko Makino, for example, utilized her material of choice: the camphor wood. Sanded to her liking, the wood represents its closest appearance to human skin texture. Symbolically, she is speaking within the context of reserved mannerism happening during communication. In its appearance her works outwardly depict raw emotionalism amplified through subtle body languages and facial gesture during social contact, so raw that those expressions become inconspicuous – the main character of her cartoonish figure. The reading of Emiko’s symbolism is enhanced even further by her knowledge of the inner working of Japanese day-to-day manner, despite also happening globally, please keep in mind that the absorption of such issues cannot stray away from the system the artist is coming from. Her decision to address such issue invites sympathy (feeling) and help bridge insights into enriching understanding towards other culture – which by the way can be attained through our sensitivity and visual intelligence.

Visual intelligence works both way, for its utility of reading (audience) and to conjure up a visual language through works (artist). Artists from all over the globe draws on the well of cultural contextualism which undergo further processing to be made a symbol. Since reading and interpreting symbolism has no right or wrong polarization and is extremely open depending on the ever changing landscape of socio-cultural terms and ideology, audience must now be taught to question and investigate the works on their own terms for favor of excavating constructive values (Boughton, 1999, p340). We cannot stress how important it is to never stop asking questions, reflect, and be critical in art work readings for this is the seed of visual intelligence.

Some questionings in the process of creating or reading art has led some artists to draw from a logical investigation rather than meaning from direct relation to visual appearances, or in other words, as Di Summa-Knoop (2013) noted “...the externality of the symbol is exceeded thus opening it to the abstract and indeterminate”. This is the case of artists like Faisal Habibi and Aditya Novali. Charged by dialectical traits their work explore possibilities that the occupier and wielder portrayed in their works. The two looked at proxy realities that their crafted objects can harness. Where one questions the idea of conventional comfort and assigned functionality through unconventionally shaped furniture objects thus critically re-investigating usability. Novali on the other hand addresses paradoxes residing within the realm of possibilities, reflection of complex and

abstract urban issues are zoomed in. In his recent exhibition 'Painting Sense', the established concepts about tradition of paintings were challenged – canvas stretchers were shown bare, brushes are made with multiple heads, and so on. These were some of the examples of 'external' appearance being further apart from their direct meaning.

Post recognition of textures, in the stereognosis test, one is required to close eyes to sense random objects placed on their hands attempting to recognize various characters of the object. Assuming that, metaphorically, our stage of 'touching' contemporary arts have lapsed, it is now the time to sense the spirit they transmit and belong to. The deep visual well subjective to our experiences are now drawn from the accumulated sensory experience; like a photographer keeping image dictionary - angles, lightings, depth of field, and surface textures - in their mind helping them to take picture. Where picture is not a mere product of combinations of methods, or camera specifications, nor technical measurements but a quick processing through 'spirit-sensing' what mood, message, and portion of reality is available before the picture taker.

### **Sensing Spirit**

"It's just a movie, there is nothing serious about it". A Statement heard countless times, so often that it took its toll. It is not that realities portrayed in the movie be made a reality in life – whatever that reality may be, but dismissing all 'entertainment' works as simple made up realities completely detached from our existence is, ignorant. The reason conceptual contemporary art existed is due to the conscious expressions that humans have: hardships, issues, sympathy, adoration, harmony, poignancy, etc are crystalized in artworks enabling them to be directed towards certain entity whatever those entities are. Little do they realize that most films, even namely, Hollywood movies, are written with a driving spirit no matter how worn, clichéd, and exhausted that spirit is. In relation to the visual intelligence, sensing spirit in art works are one that borrows from cultural studies by which studying patterns and minds lead to understanding and identifying development of culture along with all its spirits.

Spirit in the Western-historical-trajectory is not always tied to '*Jiwa*' or '*Roh*' as Indonesians perceived of its association to the component of human existence and or pertaining to cycle of life death and the relation to God. *Geist* or spirit in German is counted as both mind and soul to Hegel and is a driving force of a particular era created by men through institutions or by individuals through the thinking process of rationalization created by philosophy of reflection (Hegel: Glossary, 2014). The term *Geist* itself having occupying the mind, opens a new angle of observation allowing the inclusion of rational drive into the idea of spirit. Friedrich Nietzsche's death of god sealed in the fact that reflective and rational thinking of has caused God(s) to be put aside. Having said that, this exposition was done to document that spirit also goes to the realm of the mind and did not close any doors behind its back on

the reading of contemporary Asian art where spirit sometimes are interpreted, still, as its relation to Gods or faiths under the governance of culture and spiritual belief.

As mentioned above, spirit is a drive. The angry mobs portrayed in *Les Misérables*, supporters of Joko Widodo and partakers of Japanese *Matsuri* are three examples of people driven by demands for redemption, political reform, and celebration of beliefs respectively. Spirit in its most visible manifestation drives an entire group of people and binds them together under a unifying commonality; so do artists and artworks in their correlation to the vigilant spirit of criticism and creativity.

In the sensing phase of stereognosis, by closing one's eyes the tested simulate a post visual effect where properties of the objects held are introduced for recognition. The sensing of spirit behind artworks must also go through similar recognition process. Values offered by artists (through the art work) is processed within the mind, this is another layer of reading contemporary art that requires skill beyond that of mere vision - one that also requires another level of sensitivity beyond recognition of symbols. With the artworks now transforming, no longer the cocoon tasked of delivering visual cues but has now developed into a full-fledged idea, sensing spirit lies in first identifying the symbol then reflecting on the conveyance of its message. Agreeing or disagreeing to that idea or ideology is none of our concern at this point and is irrelevant to this topic. However, through the reflection and thinking process one assess and re-assess their believed values honing one's degree of open mindedness and intelligence. Looking past and through the physical manifestation today, the art works are but husks to idea and ideology where, in consequence, it is no longer the work itself that are being sold but the ideas behind them and how significant that idea is to the unfolding of spirit in the artistic continuum.

There will be uncertainties to the sensing of spirit and reading of meanings but the sensitivities should be honed nonetheless. The reason to why it should be honed regardless is because contemporary art works do not have a 'correct' or 'singular' way of reading as issues covered by art works often permeate to the neighboring issues other than addressing the domain of art alone and not to mention the ways of interpreting issues despite availability of artist statement. The importance of artist statement is that of prime need to support the audience with a context rather than dictation, allowing audience to engage and gain a personal fulfillment be it personal, intellectual, or aesthetic (Trench, 2009, pp16). Reading of contemporary art should not be constrained by rigid solution, but a journey through exploration of ideas; discussion must always exist; and problems are on the way to their best solutions when seen from multiple angles. Comparatively, it is best to allow the artist to lead where we should scope out context through their statements, where next, the sensing process follows in. So how does one 'sense' a spirit behind an artwork?



Study the context, gain as much information as possible from the artist, research the relevant history and look at issues surrounding the work.

Spirit can be something as believing in freedom as much as an internalization of ideals, religious matters, rationalism, and many other. Relying on a certain perspective is a trait an artist should have. The more experienced they are the better the unfolding of these 'tendencies' become, thus the more nuanced their wisdom become, the more sophisticated their idea become. An artist's tendency or a disposition is a view that they find signature-like to their art making perspective – a connecting passage to their other ideas.

The Korean artist Xoo Ang Choi explores socio-political problems within Korean life. In his works, realistic bodies are made grotesque, body parts that he believed metaphorically signifies the issues are exaggeratingly contorted or added with horror-generating effects, etching taste for *abjections*<sup>2</sup> on audience minds. His tendency to utilize body to address issues are strengthened only by his spirit to expose them inviting the audience to feel along, or better yet, meditate on the problems together.

Yoshimasa Tsuchiya through his learning experience as a conservator breathed in Japanese understanding between man and nature. He opted to craft on the material of wood so as to give a sense of 'life' giving his work the ability to age along with its maker. One respectable trait of Japanese culture is its massive respect for nature and the representation of their faith through magical creatures. If such a term 'heartscape' existed it would be fitting to express the bond between the believer and the believed where faith and emotions are intermingling at heart like the harmonious Zen garden. Once we get pass through the outer shell of symbolism into spirit we are left with the driving force of the expression itself. This spirit serves to better our understanding of the art work and possible even enriches our knowledge for the purpose of self-upgrade. Any of the values we chose to incorporate into ourselves become a cultural element one that we enact over and over again to define who we are.

### **Taking Part in Culture**

Culture is pervasive, given the right amount of publication and popularity, however, anyone can make an attempt to live in it, but not necessarily understand it. Culture is hard to understand and takes as much time to adapt and learn to live within. The sprawling of Japanese popular media for example have permeated into the visual repertoire of youths today. Gestures, gazes, voice tones, and manner have all taken influence in their lives. Rationalism, criticism, objectivism, on the other hand, are originally stemming from the

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<sup>2</sup>Within cultural studies context, the term abjection is often associated with seclusion from common acceptability leaving degrading mark on things labeled with properties such as disgusting, horror, and forceful refusal.

untranslated quality of Western culture, one that we might have to assume - give or take - in our attempt to deconstruct art. The fluidity of culture allowed it to be taken partially without the necessity to know the whole. Culture is a way of life, clinging and coiling on to the way we think and act as is. It is a single most difficult term to define along with the question of 'what is art?' as its mutation never stops.

Culture also transforms our visual language, by adapting it to the modern form we mutate culture bringing them into development and enlightenment as opposed to the idea of a static culture that exotic 'cultural exchange' has been doing - to endlessly profit from but never be allowed to grow. The detrimental effect to this is that most Indonesians never grow up from Soeharto's old cultural scheme. A scheme where different ethnical groups are put together ironically placing them side by side in their most tribal of garbs highlighting differences and sharpening the edginess of their ethnical identities within 'human zoo display cases' with the new order state as the zoo keeper (Boellstorff, 2002, pp31). It was never a model for Indonesia but a subdued image of ethnographic difference kept ready as a commodity under the new order administration (Errington, 1998, pp222). Taman Mini Indonesia Indah was first built around the idea of exoticism and underlining of difference to draw foreign revenue. As a consequence the term culture (*budaya*), to less cultured Indonesians, become a degenerating rift one that brings the term culture to its knees disabling its true understanding to mere primal primitivism.

Due to this problem it must be made clear that culture is not restrained to traditional dances, exotic rituals, and customary architecture contained in school text books. Culture can and must exist within our contemporary times. In popular subculture: the goths represent a subculture group that resembles a certain grim outlook on life attempting to relive Victorian era culture along with some of its requirements within today's modern environment, while the punk is a subculture rebelling on high-end European gentry notable for their brash music anarchistic attitude. Similar to these previous examples, a visual culture is a culture that assesses 'visualities' and realities studying them into knowledge. Among the three, all of them are examples of types of culture equipped with fitting 'isms' despite their unequal hierarchy in the streams.

Post recognition of objects with closed eyes, the test subject should now have a mental image of the object sensed along with its functions, every object thought of unfortunately has cultural significance attached to it and the test subject will react to it upon recognition. Placing a real human skull on the palm of the tested, for example, may result in disgust or something far deeper yet: confronting a reality of an impending mortality. As with mutative culture, the respond to objects the test subjects held will be various.

New cultures are emerging. Ones that are newly shaped are never the exact copy of the one pre-existing. The Japanese culture of *Kawaii* is a big phenomenon throughout the world. The advent of anime has brought this culture wide spread, hitch hiking globalization its tradition mesmerized audience throughout the world planting emotional investment within characters and franchises. *Kawaii* if translated into Indonesian context would directly imply the image of cute but in Japanese context various traits it entails must be considered to understand its context.

The Japanese anime and portrayal of the bodies is one that is less sultry and less realistic. To back this up asprove, the selling figure of Barbie™ dolls are not as great as its counterpart 'Licca-chan' by Takara™. Between the two, Licca-chan dolls are often picked up for their more friendly appearances to the Japanese taste. *New York Times* (Pollack, Internet, 1996) archived a case of six years old girl brought to a toy shop in Ginza and instantly chose Licca over Barbie. Her respond to the enquiry was simply "It is too scary".

*Kawaii* is an example to how researching for cultural understanding also helps our reading of art works, in this case Japanese art works. *Kawaii* is a symptom that emerged only within a few decades back and already it cultivates a rhizomatic acceptance in the worldwide community. *Kawaii* produces a positive feeling; a social acceptance, kindness, and calmness, a blushing cheek, and can also be a sexual appeal all at the same time (given the right context). Its acceptance bridged only by the decades old dichotomy of high art vs low art in the West. When high art was witty and its emotions are sublime, impersonal, and reserved the low art portrays a vulgar<sup>3</sup> emotions to the scale of 1:1 involvement evoking a direct emotional response from the viewer. Portrait of a child bursting in tears, the tenderness of two children hugging each other, hours and hours we spent watching puppies and kittens on youtube are considered among some of the examples belonging to the polar of 'kitsch' or what was labeled as 'low art'. *Kawaii* has an interesting metamorphosis of meaning:

*From the term "kawa-hayu-shi", which literally means face (kawa) – flushing / blushing (hayu-shi). The original meaning of this was "ashamed, can't bear to see, feel pity" was changed to "can't leave someone alone, care for". In the present paper, we call this affective feeling, typically elicited by babies, infants, and young animals, cute. – (Nittono, et al., 2012).*

Through the teaching of expressing idea, in Japanese early childhood education, teachers often point at objects or pictures that emits the beam of 'cuteness' to set an example of emotional expression. Children at their very young age looks at each other to assess

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<sup>3</sup> Vulgar within the context that it is directly frontal as opposed to being arousing or titillating.

surrounding, their clothes, themselves and put labels of *Kawaii* into a wider philosophy of subjectivity and sexuality than they ever realized at such a young age. Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010, pp66) through their experiments documented that pre-school children have started to use the term “*kawaii*” to show empathy towards, not only cute objects and animals, but also on gender labels. To them, girls are *kawaii*, while the female pre-schoolers also see themselves and their fellows as *kawaii*. Reinforcing gender role similar to the ‘more masculine’ femininity in the Western culture from positioning themselves within self surveillance from point of view of men.

*Kawaii* and its darker extents inserts itself into the seductive world of Japanese adult industry. Where benchmark for cuteness are fair skinned female with big bright eyes and ‘inviting’ apparel, the idea of *Kawaii* is now pulled and pushed around between the calming acceptance cuteness of a puppy and the image of a sexually cute and available Lolita. But contradiction is what Kazuki Takamatsu’s work is all about, from the depth field mapping the monochromatic visualization, the arming of the cute, and misplacement of the cute within a surreal atmosphere and the fetish sexualization of the cute are but some of his specialties. The appearance of mini megaphone in his work almost provided a voyeuristic feel to the repressed sexuality within the idea of cuteness: at times it is drooling, peeking, and occupying space among the lolitas – presenting a particular portion of culture.

The quirks of culture are not easily understood. Each culture assigns different values based on the fact that perspective are governed by it. Dita Gambiro a female Indonesian artist for example, cherished the importance of hair in the culture she was raised in. Integrative to the idea of feminisms hair is regarded as an identity marker, in the old times, young female figures were required to have long hairs while as they go older their hairs are tied in one bun on the back of the head revealing a more restrained and refined image, a figure with seniority that demands respect. It is based on this value Gambiro chose to investigate hair as a cultural symbol that both she takes part in and meditate on. As a female artist Gambiro also touches on other aspects of feminism through her pieces be it liberating or confining, sexual roles and gender performativity are parameters female artists often questioned and concerned themselves with.

Reading culture within artworks haul the evidence that those who depict culture are also enacting culture. Being the product of a culture they live inside. Culture is never ‘out of sight, out of mind’. Returning to our problem of lacking the sensitivity and cultural capital to ‘consume’ art is a sign of cultural absence or its lacking. It cannot be denied that art education (one that entails visual culture, museum culture, art consumption culture) as we know it comes from the Western civilization but the cultural practice of making art has always existed from time immemorial – throughout cultures, throughout the world. So to attempt to answer the prime questions of ‘is it even art?’ out of stagnancy being unable and

not knowing how to consume art works in this concurrent time. Above are a set of examples ones that illustrate how art are to be seen from its cultural readings; It is not as simple as replying with the tone 'yes it is art' but rather we can point out the cultural qualities that make art functions: the reading of symbols, the sensing of spirit, and taking part in the critical culture contemporary art created. The intelligent use of symbols, the morality of the spirits, and the self-investigative nature of a particular culture will speak for themselves answering the question of 'is it even art?'

### **Closure**

Answering the last question of 'is it even art?' symbol, spirit, culture have been laid with examples to illustrate access which are, of course, not limited to the way they are read but to provide a revelation to the unanswered, mystified, enigma to those unfamiliar with art. Our only wish is that those interested but unfamiliar to art scenes should not be repelled by the difficulty of reading art simply because it is too alienating and too inaccessible to consume. Assistance to the art readings themselves are minimum let alone the utilization of exhibition tours and public programs.

The pursuit to visual sensitivities, criticism, and open mindedness is of one subjective option each has to decide for themselves. However it is the downfall of the Indonesian art scene when we have 'accepted' the idea that our art world public is small and therefore the accessibility of it should be catered to the ones who frequently consume them.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1992, pp112) once stated, "Love of art is a clear mark of the chosen ones which meant to separate them from the rest". That statement was made under the case of classic European art consumption in European museum which case is completely different to the one we are in right now. Having said that, we have to admit that genuine interest in the arts will take one far in terms of art knowledge, studying philosophies, familiarizing oneself with histories and art history, etc. However, the public has no need to go this far. Only some would muse and aspire themselves beyond the consumption method this essay is discussing. The general public arguably benefit very little from the bombardments of extensive academia, but by participating in the most fundamental of art consumption reaping benefit art accessibility has to offer is not too far behind.

The process of reading art takes the simple steps many have not realized, reflected in the stereognosis test the process involves reading, sensing, and reacting.

Metaphorically touching objects to recognize its characteristic is a variable that can be replaced by understanding symbols and the cultural context. When the introductory phase has finished, random objects are then placed on one hands to allow them to recognize object with the absence of visual cues. Those referred to as 'astereognosis' will fail being

unable to palpate the object placed in their hands. Comparable to the general public in Indonesia where looking beyond the externality of paintings proven to be difficult as they lack the sensitivity and the visual intelligence to do so rendering them 'astereognosis' in consumption of art. The process however does not stop here, those who managed to progress further in the test may react to the cultural significance of the said object. Placing an enchanted keris on a blindfolded Javanese who still believes in their spiritual tradition so strongly may induce him fear and respect towards the dagger. Symbol, spirit, culture requires reading, sensing, reacting respectively to uncover.

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