

Solo Exhibition: Octora

On The edge of awareness

“While conflict among peoples and nations is as old as human history, it nonetheless seems that the twentieth century may perhaps prove to be one of the most violent. The reason for this may relate not to the fact that there have been more conflicts in this century, but our awareness of them has increased in manifold ways.” (Okwui Enwezor)

Conflict and violence are issues close to the human self since the dawn of time. The 20th century heralded an escalation of conflict and violence. Modern civilizations are "colored" by the millions of victims of two world wars and various conflicts between nations, ideologies, politics, ethnics, race, and religions. News about global conflict are featured in global mass media outlets everyday. So intense are these news, that they have numbed people's hearts and empathy toward the conflicts and instances of violence that continue on around them. Furthermore, we are no longer fully trustful of the news we find on mass media outlets, oftentimes colored by political and capitalist interests. They are oftentimes constructed to herd public opinions. On the other hand, groups practicing organized violence, such as terrorist groups, tend to use global mass media to spread terror and threats. What Okwui Enwezor said seems well-suited to describe it,

“Advancements in technology and sophisticated communication system have turned the eyewitness account of war and conflict into public spectacle, while seemingly information, in the context of the production of “hard news”, nevertheless transform the most brutal moments of violence, war and suffering into a banal kind of entertainment, as distanced from the true reality and the fantasies of the Hollywood image machine.”ⁱ

As noted by Enwezor, banal records and news of violence have become objects of voyeurism for the audience. For those who sit far from where the instances of violence are happened, or far from where the news and reports of violence are being recorded, the repetitiveness has made those events into simulacra, into fiction and spectacle, as though nothing is true anymore. Thus human sensitivity and empathy for the victims of violence lessen, because people are growing more accustomed to think that violence is a sort of inevitability that the "victims" must accept.

The issues of conflict, violence, and trauma are often highlighted as a topic in contemporary art. However, if instances global conflict and violence--appearing on the television sets of many family spaces across the world, easily and banally, courtesy of mass media--no longer inspire sensitivity, empathy, or awareness, what about art that represents the same issues? It is not easy to answer this. Unlike mass media and popular art—although there are accusations of how a large part of contemporary art has the same pattern as popular art—contemporary art operates in a different way. On the other hand, contemporary art doesn't have definite boundaries about its praxis. Contemporary art works can be extremely banal and transgressive, or it can also be sublime. Yet, unlike mass media, contemporary art does not make real-time/actual reports. In certain ways, contemporary art cannot be considered as "communication channels" either. As such, contemporary art is often seen as a paradoxical practice. For a long time now, Adorno has reminded us *“to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”*. Although there are many conflicting interpretations of Adorno's statement, it is clear that works of art, considered as reflections of the human heart and "compassionate" character, are powerless against the sea of conflict and violence that surrounds, even engulfs, the modern human. Artworks are not intended to solve problems directly. Artworks are realms of contemplation. With this understanding, we can observe Octora's works in a more expansive way. Because Octora's work do represent the conflicts and violence that this country has experienced.

Octora's works in this exhibition discuss human negative behaviors--their aggressiveness and destructiveness. However, it doesn't mean that Octora's works are, or have become, transgressive. Octora's works appear with an aesthetic language. Though sometimes we might feel a vague sense of unease due to Octora's works, it might just be a consequence of the chosen theme. Octora is fully aware that besides the contents and themes of her work, she is foremost an artist with the intention of creating works of art. Unlike the news or mass media reports that are usually tied to actual/realtime events, Octora's works—despite referencing certain events—are aimed at the more fundamental aspects of human behavior. In other words, the visual components being constructed here can be returned to generic aspects: that, at the heart of it, humankind has the potential to be aggressive. It seems that aggression and destruction are characters often downplayed in civilizations and cultures, despite the many instances that prove otherwise. Aggression is actually the background of civilizations. Ironically, civilization—that cannot be separated from identity construction—often becomes an outlet of an overwhelmingly destructive and aggressive energy. Look at what happens when one civilization, or one identity construction, tries to snuff out another identity construction. This seems to be Octora's main concern.

Although they are discussing conflict, violence, and trauma, Octora's works cannot be seen as full representations of the above issues. This is another difference between how conflict and violence are portrayed in mass media and artworks. We need sensitivity and understanding to read the visual cues conveyed by Octora in her works. A slab of meat that is hung with hats worn law enforcement personnels (police? soldier?), *caping* (a farmer's hat), *peci* (a flat-topped hat) in *Corpus*, acts as a representation of the human body—as a victim. We might shudder as we look at it. This work is "disturbing" not because it is intentionally transgressive, but because of the association it builds in us as we look at it. Identities or attributes often associated with the body, disappear completely when they are presented as meat on the bone. This way, Octora tries to remind us that identity is a constructed thing. The "victim" is hung alongside symbols of identity, clearly showing that, whoever we are, within the vortex of violence, we are all prone to become victims of it, or even the aggressors.

Meat also appears in the work *Kemurnian dan elit*, a slab of meat peeking out of the pocket of a shirt pocket. The single, unidentifiable, mysterious piece of clothing can be imagined to be a representation of hidden figures, or intellectual actors, who profit from the conflicts they create—without care of the victims. The messages in *The glorious sadness*, *Menjadi akar rumput* and *Istirahat dalam damai* seem to share a connection with *Kemurnian dan elit*. All three works use gauze bandages to represent "victims" of the elites or intellectual actors. Gauze bandages in *The glorious sadness* are sewn into a simple and cheap *kebaya*, propped in the midst of a mound of rice that can be seen as a representation of the lower classes. Placed inside a glass box hanging on a swing-like structure, the work seems to indicate the position of the grassroots being at the mercy of the elites. Meanwhile, in *Menjadi akar rumput* gauze bandages have been made into a shirt that are commonly worn by the working class. Stored in a glass box on top of a precarious-looking table, it clearly represents the situation and position of the grassroots in the power hierarchy. Gauze bandages, commonly used to wrap wounds, provide direct meaning for Octora's works. This is seen in the work *Istirahat dalam damai*. The title is surely an irony of what the work is trying to describe. A collection of hearts made from gauze bandages are placed inside an acrylic vitrine, the surface of which are thinly illustrated with images of a group of people with their hands bound, helplessly waiting to be 'laid to rest'/'erased'. Imagine the feelings of these people waiting for their fates. We often wonder about the feelings of the executioners whose "work" is to eliminate groups of people. Octora's work seems to ask, where goes the human "heart"? Is this the depth of the "wound" inside one's heart?

Lately, many past instances of political violence—especially those perpetrated in the 1960s—are being revived by mass media. For today's generation, reports of many hundreds of thousands of people being "eliminated just like that" can be terrifying thoughts. Octora's works cannot be separated from the historical context and memories of political conflicts in Indonesia. The work *Mangkok merah* wishes to say that humankind seems to never learn much from history. The Indonesian nation is often criticized of having historical amnesia. This particular work is inspired by a series of political violence in West Kalimantan in the 1960s. Two red bowls bore the following quote from Santayana in their interior, "*Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it*". The bowls are laid out on a table in a dimly lit room. One bowl is filled with water, another bowl with rice grains. This work appears dramatic, and may jolt us to 'remember' how this nation—including us who live in it—often forget about history. This is certainly a worrying problem. Octora admits that her motivation to highlight conflict and violence stemmed from no small concern that the same dark chapter in history could repeat again today. Octora is aware, and worried, of the fact that if she were to be trapped in a vortex of conflict such as this that she might become a victim, or perhaps a predator.

The work *My dear gentlemen-oh insignia!* seems to be conveying an irony about conflict and violence. The armed forces work to kill enemies who threaten the safety of the nation. International conflict--or even a conflict within a national boundary, such as civil strife--that end in war, is a story as old as time. Certainly, in the name of "humanity", they always try to draw up rules of engagements for conflict situations. This is why all armed forces require a high level of discipline and a rigorous hierarchy. On the other hand, they are also needed for an effective war strategy. In the end, in armed conflicts and wars, "acts of killing" between opposing forces are the endgame. Octora's work consists of an array of uniforms, placed in an orderly, but still menacing configuration. They appear very rigid but also transparent, becoming a force that can penetrate all community boundaries within society. We can still remember how, during the Soeharto Era, armed forces controlled our nation. Created from barbed wire, if we look closely we will see how each fold is sharp and 'painful'.

Octora's works are far from the banal descriptions of conflict, violence, and trauma. These works make use of visual and material components in a symbolic way, as an attempt to sublimate the issues at hand. As such, Octora is very much aware that it is not easy for the audience to immediately capture her meaning. For Octora, however, it is equally fine if her audience is unable capture the intended meaning. Representational art exist between two poles: art (aesthetics) and critique--expressed through works of art. In this way, aesthetic perception becomes affective, with a hope/aim to build up a cognitive aspect, i.e. reading and thinking triggered

by aesthetic perception. Certainly, they all depend on the capacity and knowledge capital of each audience member. In reality, art sensibility/perception and reading (appreciation) is a complex process, because although aesthetic perception is affective, it is indeed connected to the cognitive aspects of knowledge and experience about the discourses of contemporary art. Perhaps what Eleanor Heartney's words can be used to explain the position of Octora's works, "*Within these approaches, concern for aesthetics and critique is often equal, suggesting that beauty may in fact be a powerful tool in the rhetoricians' arsenal*". ii

In a conversation, Octora said that what's important for her is the creation of artworks. However, she also emphasizes the importance of her works being able to speak about many issues. For Octora, a full and genuine discussion of issues can only be achieved if she works with issues that unsettle her. At first, I thought that Octora's works were also therapeutic vehicles for her to express her confusion over the intensity of conflict and violence in humankind. Ironically, her attempts to further understand and research the issues of violence and conflict—at least, those occurring in Indonesia—have made her even more aware of how people can become savage toward one another. Octora sees how easy it is for society to be instigated, agitated, and be moved to oppress other people who are considered "different" and thus a perceived threat. This should convince us that Octora's works shown in this exhibition come indeed from the depth of her heart.

However, Octora also "agitates" over the visual issues of her works, such as the methods and material used in her works. This shows how issues about art and critique have become part of a back-and-forth dynamic that can converge into a powerful tool, as stated by Eleanor Heartney. Therefore, despite their simple appearances, the materials used and visual configurations achieved are results of deep thought, sensitivity, and of a lengthy [creative] process on the part of the artist. It may be that Octora's works in this exhibition are not as [visually] attractive as her previous works. However, they are "deeper" and more contemplative, because they are the results of Octora's sublimation of the issues being addressed.

What has been stated here shows how Octora maintains a distance from the conflict and violence she represents. It seem, too, that all of the visual components here have been specially-created. Octora could easily have used found objects in her works, a common practice amongst many artists when discussing the trauma of violence to build memory/works. For Octora, the most important thing is not memory of the past—though, it doesn't mean that she's ignoring it—but rather, the cultivation of an awareness of the future by learning from the past. This is indeed the root of Octora's anxieties. An awareness of the future by avoiding potential conflicts seems like a utopic thing. The exhibition *On the edge of awareness* has a double meaning. Its main message: in the end, the most important thing is "awareness"; yet, but on the other hand, the theme tries to show the artist's anxieties, because we—as a nation—are at a crucial point in our existence, because we are not using our potential for "awareness" that can trigger an inward critique, or an evaluation of the darker periods in our history, and therefore the ability to move toward the future with a positive awareness. Without it, as a multicultural nation, we will always have to contend with a potential of conflict and violence every step of the way.

i

Okwui Enwezor, "Moment of Violence" dalam *The Edge of Awareness* (Milan: Edizioni Charta), 1998, hlm. 84.

ii

Eleanor Heartney. *Art & Today* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited), 2008, hlm. 367.