

Rasa and Everyday Kindnesses: Fajar Abadi and the Subversion of Ordinary Transactions

Elly Kent,

PhD candidate,

Australian National University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art
ellen.kent@anu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

"If anaesthetics befuddle and dull us, causing us not to feel pain or pleasure, it would make sense to see aesthetics as the inverse of this: our lively sensitivity to stimulus from without and within; our sensate connectivity to a world of things and other people; our responsibility to a world of feelings." (Highmore, 2010). In his book called 'Ordinary Lives' Highmore invokes Williams (Williams, 1958) descriptions of culture as ordinary, in an attempt to reframe art and creativity as part of the construction (or perhaps reconstruction) of our human world. For these theorists, the emotion, sensation and subjective connection to the everyday is integral to our aesthetic life. So too for Fajar Abadi, and the underlying concept of his participatory artworks, and the objects, situations and ephemera he creates to facilitate them. Drawing on field research that includes interviews, participation and observations in his projects, and documentation, this paper will explore how Abadi interprets and utilises rasa. How does this concept, which has been the subject of some prominent discourse relating it to intuitive understanding rather than to 'feeling' as it is often translated (Stange, 1984), emerge in Abadi's artworks? What is Abadi's understanding of rasa and its role in his creative process? Abadi's artworks comprise interventions into the ordinary transactions of urban life. When he bakes and exchanges cakes for photographed smiles (Kue Senyum, 2010 -), or applauds unsuspecting passengers on public transport (Tepuk Tangan Nuhun, 2013), Fajar is attempting to recognise and replicate a language of kindness within our daily transactions. Keywords: Fajar Abadi, everyday kindnesses, ordinary transaction,

INTRODUCTION

In his book *'Ordinary Lives'*, Highmore invokes a most pedestrian and functional understanding of aesthetics, referring it back to Williams' (Williams, 1958) (1958) descriptions of culture as ordinary in an attempt to reframe art and creativity as part of the construction (or perhaps reconstruction) of our human world. For these theorists, emotion, sensation and subjective connection to 'the everyday' is integral to human-kind's aesthetic expression. So too in Fajar Abadi's participatory artworks, and the objects, 'documentation' and ephemera he creates to facilitate them. In this paper I will discuss three works by Fajar Abadi (b.1985), a young artist who grew up in Depok, Jakarta, and studied sculpture in the Faculty of Visual Art the Institute of Technology, Bandung, in West Java. The works in question, *Mamakuaing*, *Kueh Senyum* and *Tepuk Tangan Nuhun*, share a common 'language of action' which Abadi has developed from observations of everyday life and relationships.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mamakuaing was initially held at S.14 Library and Art Space in Bandung, with Abadi losing in a mother versus son cooking competition, judged by those attending the exhibitions opening. My first encounter with the project came at the subsequent participatory event,

which involved mothers and children from a nearby 'trash-picking' community in a cooking workshop presented by Abadi and Mamah.¹ Abadi draws (literally and figuratively) a metaphor around the phrase "*rasa*", which simultaneously means taste, touch and emotion. In this word Abadi sees the embodiment of the complex mother-child relationship. He described to participants in the workshop how he was skinny, fussy eater and how Mamah would harangue, tempt, and eventually force-feed him until he became the considerably-sized man he is now. Through these stories, he subtly imparted his understanding of the multi-faceted aspects of his relationship with his mother; authority, care, responsibility, force, submission and mutual recognition.

Returning to the exhibition space, I began to understand how Abadi's studio and participatory projects are mutually informative. A series of short videos in the style of martial arts videos showed Abadi and Mamah battling each other with cooking implements, interspersed with documentation of the opening where Mamah spoon-fed the competing dishes to visitors. Themed 'memorabilia' hung around the small exhibition space and a series of drawings depicting plans for the installation, performance and poetic image and word play. A coloured drawing featured a slim hand proffering a spoon, on which a mouthful of glowing green food lights up the darkness, revealing the text underneath: "the taste/flavour/feel of mother."

At the "... exhibition at Gallery Rachel some six months later, Mamah was once again pressed into the service of artistic concept. Visitors entered the space, which was arranged as an approximation of a home; with a rug draped across the low bench at the gallery's shop-front window and down onto the floor. Beside a bamboo mat sits Mamah, patiently spooning food into the mouths of Jakarta's hippest art patrons. I expected my discomfort with the idea of being 'on-stage' amongst this city crowd to continue when I sat down to be taste from Mamah's array of home cooked dishes. I was surprised to be quickly enveloped in the warmth of her small smile and assertive 'performance,' and flattered that she remembered me from our meeting months ago at S.14, asking after my children as she scooped a mouthful of rice and vegetable soup into my mouth.

In a catalogue interview with the curators, Abadi explains his decision to use his mother rather than a representation of her.

"In my work I often can't implement concepts around happenings by myself, I need someone else to strengthen the concept that I am building. Not just someone to pretend to be Mamah, or an object that is employed to be Mamah, but to bring in Mamah herself." (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013)²

This determination to eschew the connotative signs for the denotative object itself, demonstrates Williams' assertions that creativity is not, and must not be, separate from the creativity of living. "Everything we see and do, the whole structure of our relationships and institutions, depends, finally, on an effort of learning, description and communication. We create our human world as we have thought of art being created." (Williams, 1992)³ And so to describe a broader concept of maternal relationships, and the emotions socially embedded in there-in, Abadi uses the most accurate descriptor he can find, one from his own human world.

The history of art in Indonesia has many examples of this thinking, which has been referred to a kind of social realism, (Yangni, 2012). The most prominent of these occurs in

<> I have also discussed this project in "Making It to Bandung," RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs 47, no. 1 (2013)

2 My translation from (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013) p.9. This catalogue was presented in English and Indonesian, but I have elected to make my own translation from the original Indonesian.

3 (Williams, 1992) Quoted in (Highmore, 2010)

the writings of Soedjojono, who in the 1930s implored the ‘painters of Indonesia’ to reject the romanticised view of the beautiful Indies, and to paint the ‘sugar factories and the emaciated peasant, the motorcars of the rich and the pants of the poor youth.’ (Holt, 1967) In 1975, Sanento Yuliman identified a shift in the way Indonesian artists –represented in that instance by the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB)– interpreted this relationship with ‘the everyday’. Discarding the ephemeral, spiritual trace of the artist in the art work (“*jiwa ketok*” as Soedjojono referred to it), Yuliman’s new perspective presented “a new kind of engagement and involvement by art –to the concreteness of our physical presence, the concreteness of our surrounding, the concreteness of experience.” (Yuliman, 1975) I will return to GSRB later, for now we recognise in this concreteness the emergence of found objects as a medium. And in Abadi’s *MamahKuaing*, we can also recognise the found person, the found relationship.

Abadi explains that these familial relationships underpin his understanding of how everyday exchanges and interactions are conducted. “I think in action there is a visual language that is a more complete package. I take a lot from everyday life, from the behaviour of kids who refer back to the behaviour of the people in their home, mother, father, other family members, and their friends. There is a greater likelihood, I think, that concepts can be synchronised through languages of action.” (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013)⁴

This language of action is the key methodology that underpins Abadi’s participatory projects. In *KuehSenyum* (Smile Cakes) notions of exchange, value and languages of action are again the central motif. The project involves Abadi occupying a public space with his “booth”⁵ from which he sets about baking muffins on site, to exchange with passers-by for the price of a smile and a photograph. For each event Abadi strives to create a congenial atmosphere that supports the project’s concept, a spatial organisation best described as installation. Drawn in by the carefully considered set up, participants in the project are invited to take a muffin and enjoy it in exchange for a smile, which Abadi, or an assistant, photographs. The photos themselves are then signed –becoming a kind of contract of exchange– and incorporated into the installation.

Abadi cites many reasons behind the conceptual basis of the project; deconstructing the monetising of emotion and consumption; constructing a counterpoint to what he sees as a kind of epidemic of cynicism in Indonesian society.

“...in *KuehSenyum*, the main concept, apart from collecting smiles, is exchange value, not just agreed value. Looking at the monetary situation, the stock exchange, different currency exchange rates, it’s all confusing to me; it’s not real value, it makes our lives more complicated, and even at a certain point drives people to despair. I want to nurture optimistic feelings in the face of situations like this.” (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013)⁶

For the inaugural SEA+ Triennial Abadi was able to realise the construction of a project-specific vehicle for *KuehSenyum*, which had previously more resembled a boutique cake stall recognisable from artisan markets. The new form was closer to the diverse forms of street

4 Saya pikir dalam tindakan ada bahasa-bahasa rupa yang pakatnya lebih lengkap. Saya banyak mengambil dari kehidupan sehari-hari, dari perilaku anak yang mengacu pada perilaku orang-orang di rumahnya, ayah, ibu, anggota keluarga yang lain, dan teman-temannya. Saya merasa perilaku bisa menjadi alat untuk mengkomunikasikan gagasan. Ada kemungkinan lebih tinggi, menurut saya, gagasan dapat bersinkronisasi dalam bahasa tindakan. (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013) p.5

5 Like many Indonesians Abadi is an accomplished English speaker, with an American accent and vocabulary. Australian readers might better understand the ‘booth’ as a ‘stall’.

6 Misal di *KuehSenyum* gagasan utama selain mengumpulkan senyum adalah pertukaran nilai, sekadar nilai-nilai yang menjadi kesepakatan saja. Melihat kegiatan moneter, pertukaran saham, nilai tukar uang yang berbeda-beda yang memusingkan buatsaya, itu bukan nilai yang sebenarnya dan membuat hidup kita semakin rumit dan bahkan dalam titik tertentu membuat keputusan. Saya ingin menanamkan *rasa* optimis menghadapi keadaan semacam ini. (Priatna & Adhisuryo, 2013) p.15

food trading found in the Indonesian context highly mobile forms like *kaki lima*, the five foot long restaurants on wheels; bicycles delivering dairy products and herbal medicines; and motorbikes announcing their wares along the streets with distinctive horns and loud-speakers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this same tradition, Abadi acquired a motor trike with a utility tray at the rear, and custom designed and built the fittings in the garage studio he shares with a number of other artists and artisans in Bandung's Cigadung suburb. The planning drawings show a doll house arrangement enlarged to dominate the set up, with fold out sections providing bench space for preparations and photo display, as well as a supplementary A-board for extra space. Abadi explained that he wanted to create a discreet entity that could take *KuehSenyum* to broader audiences. This is the kind of tactical manoeuvre that De Certeau distinguishes from strategies by its terms of time and space. The tactic, de Certeau argues, departs from no spatial or institutional localisation; these are the preserve of the strategy, which operates from its 'proper' locale to establish relations with 'exteriors' (competitors, partners, opposition etc.). "On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." (de Certeau, 1984) In essence, Abadi's goal in creating a self-contained vehicle, is to cut out the prescribed restrictions – economic and social class, civic zoning or audience awareness – that are inherent in any one place.

KuehSenyum also asks how we might defend human interactions from the relentless commodification and monetising of the world. Abadi's initial concept for *KuehSenyum* proposed to set up in the lobby of Bursa Efek, the foreign exchange building in Jakarta. Here the criticality of the concept would have come to the fore. The idea never came to fruition, but the failed proposal process reveals much, involving a phone call interview with a building manager who wanted to know exactly who would be responsible for the smiles of the staff who participated. In certain contexts smiles may indeed become units of trade, with all the associated requirements for transparency, clarity and documents of ownership.

In Priatna's essay for the "... catalogue, he describes Abadi's exchanges as "part of a process of harmonisation that allows Abadi to lift the veil of '*rasa*' as an aesthetic experience through his works of art."⁷ Whatever the concept he seeks to express, Abadi's underlying methodology lies in the manipulation of emotions, the evocation of '*rasa*.' *Rasa* itself is a concept both more and less specific than its translations into English. Flavour, sense, emotion – all of these can be represented by '*rasa*', making it an ideal denotative signifier for an artist such as Abadi, who is interested in language and emotion. Stange points out that power and knowledge in the Enlightenment tradition, which also informs post-industrial society (and dominant understandings of what aesthetics are), does not account for all epistemologies of social power. Among those that differ, is the Javanese concept of *rasa*. According to Gonda (1973) Javanese *rasa* conflates the Sanskrit definition of sense and emotion (which is close to the defined Indonesian language usage) with another Sanskrit word *rahasya* for secret or meaning. *Rasa* is at once the substance, vibration, or quality of what is apprehended and the tool or organ which receives it." (Stange, 1984) I contend here then, that *rasa* in this sense is aesthetics, that nebulous concept that encompasses object, emotion, subject and logic in one indistinct form.

Abadi interprets *rasa* as the fundamental principle of an artist's activity. He described the moment he decided to become an artist, in high school, as simultaneous to his understanding of the power of *rasa*. At the time, he had begun earning pocket money by giving massages at school and near the local mosque, and was taken aback by the realisation that massage was a

7 "Pertukaran tersebut adalah sebuah proses penyelarasan yang memungkinkan Fajar untuk menyingkap tabir '*rasa*' sebagai pengalaman estetika melalui kerja seninya," in (Priatna, 2013) p.35

language of action that could skip the unspoken stages of gradual intimacy that usually apply between two individuals. "Massaging at that point became the same as poetry, the same as singing. I really did say then, that my definition of an artist was a person who could access, optimally, *rasa*. Whether it is sense, whether it is feeling, whether it is the sensation of smell, of touch. Or even if it is words, even if it is thoughts. I was drawn to explore *rasa* there. That's why I became an artist. So, I didn't have a particular form, I thought I could do it with music, with words...."⁸

The video work *Tepuk Tangan Nuhun* (Applause in Gratitude) begins with the view of a count-down to a green traffic light, with surf-style guitar providing the musical backdrop to as we register the scenario; a young driver is checking his mirror, looking back into the vehicle full of passengers. The point of view switches and we join the conspiracy, peering out through the hidden camera at the rear of the *angkot*.⁹ Outside the *angkot* now, we watch from behind as a passenger boards, witnessing her stare in alarm as the rest of the passengers suddenly and simultaneously begin clapping. Her face adjusts only subtly as she seems to undergo a range of emotions; eventually, as the young woman beside her (appears to) explain what has happened and offers her a chocolate bar reward, her demeanour changes. We hear none of the conversation that takes place, the editing gives us only the sound of cheering and clapping before the music obscures the dialogue in the vehicle. We can only watch in anticipation as this particular passenger eventually smiles broadly, touching her hands to her chest to indicate her relief and acceptance of this strange occurrence. This pattern repeats throughout the video, as passengers board and alight.

In the editing of this video the audience is enlisted as part of the conspiracy, witnessing two a priori participant groups; active and passive, with the latter's existence contingent on the former's actions. As viewers, we are placed in the position of the active participants. This seems to acknowledge the impossibility of accessing the passive participant's experience through posterior documentation, documentation which we have made an active decision to engage with.

Analysis of this video quickly yields the understanding that it is more than mere documentation of a participatory art event. This is a video work in and of itself; a conscious attempt by the artist to re-present an emotional arc, from a particular view-point, to a new audience. Abadi says that making subsequent video-works playful and fun is a comfortable way for him to negotiate his ideas with this new audience. "In the documentation and outside of the moment of the project's implementation, that moment can't be experienced or shared completely with my audience. So I need a vehicle to access the empathy of the viewers, and that (vehicle) is a composition that is cute and playful." (Abadi, 2014) Close attention to this video and the video-works that have resulted from the other two participatory works also reveals the way in which Abadi continuously borrows from the every-day in his approach to video works, utilising the vernacular of advertising, music-video clips and computer gaming; screen-culture. Abadi is again playing with language, exploiting the implicit understandings that decades of television advertising have instilled in his audience, Abadi uses these same strategies to 'synchronise' his concepts with his audience. These strategies borrow (consciously or otherwise) on that of the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (GSRB) in the 1970s and 80s. From the beginning GSRB were fascinated by ordinariness, utilising such materials as crackers, toys, household furniture and other found objects. Yuliman commented on GSRB's 1979 exhibition: "Perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of a new art practice that provides us not with an

8 This quote comes from a conversation that began around Abadi's massage project, in which he travelled through Bandung and Yogyakarta massaging and conversing with artists that he admires. (Kent)

9 *Angkots* are small vans used as public transport, primarily in West Java, although there are variants (in name and form) in almost all regional towns in Indonesia.

imaginary experience that we ponder from a distance, but an experience that engages our bodily presence as well the physical environment that surrounds us, in which both we and the work are located.” (Yuliman, 1979)

CONCLUSION

Interestingly, although we can certainly see a lineage of aesthetics tendencies drawn from the everyday and the ordinary, with Abadi's works a shift in perspective occurs. In consumerism and commercialism GSRB found inspiration in the machinations behind mercantile transactions; like Williams and many others, they reject the idea that consumers are an indiscriminate mass, incapable of rational decision making in the face of persuasive design, as elitist. However, in Abadi's work we encounter a more complex analysis of the power and value of design; Abadi does not adopt the vernacular of contemporary consumer culture merely as a point of reference, or as a subversion of elitism in art (although there are elements of this). Abadi is interested in these aesthetic expressions as a language of form that can evoke emotions, however he redirects their primary function – as sales tools – in order to sell what cannot be bought; maternal affection, playfulness, absurdity and joy. In doing so, he draws attention again to the invaluable nature of interpersonal transactions, or languages or action.

REFERENCES

- Abadi, F. (2014, 13/09/2014). [Pertanyaan untuk tulisanku] de Certeau, M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Gonda, J. (1973), *Sanskrit in Indonesia* (Vol. 99.). New Delhi International Academy of Indian Culture.
- Highmore, B. (2010), *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*: Routledge.
- Kent, E. (2013), Making it to Bandung. *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 47(1), 139.
- Priatna, R. (2013), *Rasa Sebagai Pengalaman Estetika Fajar Abadi “...”*. Jakarta: ROH projects.
- Priatna, R., & Adhisuryo. (2013), Interview with Fajar Abadi *Fajar Abadi “...”*. Jakarta: ROH projects.
- Stange, P. (1984), The logic of *rasa* in Java. *Indonesia*, 113-134.
- Williams, R. (1958), *Culture is Ordinary Resources of Hope* (pp. 3-18). London: Verso. (Reprinted from: 1989).
- Williams, R. (1992), *The Long Revolution*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Yangni, S. (2012), *Dari Khaos ke Khaosmos: Estetika Seni Rupa*. Yogyakarta: Erupsi Akademia and Institut Seni Indonesia.
- Yuliman, S. (1979), A New Perspective. In J. Supangkat (Ed.), *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (pp. 96-98). Jakarta: PT Gramedia.

OTHER RESOURCE

Kent, E. Interview with Fajar Abadi