

# *A Speculation: Through Terhah Language, Art Returns to Daily Rituals*

by: Grace Samboh

*"Cengklimuh?"*

*"Burjuah."*

*"Ciknur!"*

A conversation took place in the hallways of the Graphic Arts Building in the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) between a number of mischievously smiling students. At first glance, the way speak to each other sounds like Sundanese (a specific language used in West Java), especially its local dialect. They were instead speaking Terhah, a constructed language created by their own peer, Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi, who since 2006 has disseminated eleven exemplars of Terhah dictionaries throughout his campus. The Terhah language then became quite popular to the point that it is often heard throughout the campus. Interpreted, the conversation above discusses a print medium. In translation: "Using what?" "Lithography stone." "Good."

Though the use of Terhah may appear to be "light" in the above context, Garibaldi is in fact not joking. Born in 1985, this artist who recently did two shows entitled "Abiogenesis: Terhah Landscape" and "Interstitial: Terhah", has been known to work with living mediums, microorganisms that are unseen by bare eyes, as well as fungi or fern. Even when working on something that appears to be in jest, like his constructed language, he meticulously creates spaces where many elements may participate and collaborate. Thus, the Terhah language does not end as Garibaldi's sole possession. Once the Terhah dictionary was spread out, his friends realized that comprehending the language would not require mere rote memorization, but rather an opportunity to be involved in adding new words to the language. In Garibaldi's campus, the Terhah language became very popular. Between 2006 – 2011, Garibaldi himself often used his own language as titles for his works.

Language acts as a tool of communication between members of society that takes the form of sounds created by human voices. It may be argued that communication may be conducted through other means, such as smoke, the sound of percussion, images in caves, and others; however, it cannot be avoided that every form of trade and almost all forms of societal activities would be rendered paralyzed without language.<sup>1</sup> The system of communication that is language utilizes meaningful indicators that may be either be stated or written down. There are a number of interesting debates in the history of languages with regards to the relation between words and meaning. These exchanges have resulted in a number of studies such as etymology (the existence of words in certain languages, or onomatopoeia (words that mimic sounds). However, the two are heavily contingent on an agreement in society regarding the aforementioned languages. It may be more accurate, then, to suggest a more arbitrary relation between words and meanings. These arbitrary symbols are then agreed upon by certain societies as means of communication. After such agreements have been made, a language may then become gradually acculturated.

In Bandung society, people most often utilize Sundanese as well as Indonesian in their daily communication, but Garibaldi does not just simplistically attempt to add another language to the status quo. Indonesia is known as a nation that has an amalgam of local languages. Until 2008, The Language Department of National

Education (Pusat Bahasa Departemen Pendidikan Nasional) has recorded more than 750 local languages that are still in use today outside of the Indonesian language, which is officially taught to all Indonesian citizens.<sup>2</sup> A society of languages may be more accurately described as an amalgamation of users rather than consumers—who only purchase, utilize, repurchase, and reuse again—as they become themselves involved in the dynamic development of their own respective languages, beginning with the addition of new words, the development of pronouns, and the such.<sup>3</sup>

In this Internet age, users become agents of dissemination for ideas of objects or brands that they purchase themselves. Such objects or brands then obtain value due to the image of what the users add to them. In Garibaldi's case, the society of users are his own peers, who have contributed to the Terhah language as we know it today—eight years since 2006—that now contains approximately 1500 entries recorded in the Terhah dictionary, complete with its own grammatical structure as well as typography. A number of words have been added by its users for their own uses. *Wonka*, for instance, means “Poji's motorcycle”. *Kermuti* which means “Aurora the pretty girl” was added by Garibaldi's friend who needed a statement for and of herself. There was an art space in Bandung called *Aarmuh* (which means “hello”), as well as an independent band called *Curmiu* (which means “dragon-headed black squid”). There is also the story of Fajar Abadi, a performance artist who methodically involves others in his process of thinking, creating, and action in his works. Abadi collaborated with Garibaldi in a performance in 2006. They both hung themselves (as a form of standing upside down), exchanged self-made poems in the Terhah language, while flirting and engaging with women who passed around them. Of course no one new what these two bachelors were saying, but this was part of their intentions.

Garibaldi's entire process may be seen as pure mischief; from creating the language itself, distributing it, all the way through to the active roles that his peers played in developing the vocabulary and popularity of Terhah. Sanento Yuliman, an Indonesian art critic, once said: It is unfortunate that the understanding of ‘art as the joy of working’ has not become popularized in our country, and people tend to distance art from other forms of work.<sup>4</sup> The first component of his statement spurs us to reconsider art-making's state in the current contemporary art. This is especially worth noting given that the dissemination of Terhah as a language displays the spirit and happiness of its users.

A similar phenomena may also be observed in other forms of art in Indonesia. Try looking at the preparations of an overnight *wayang* (shadow puppet) performance. Most likely you will find the *sinden* (a specific type of singer in Javanese performances) putting on her make up while laughing out loud with all the *gamelan* (traditional Indonesian instrument) players. Both *sinden* and *gamelan* players clearly do not play the main role in the *wayang* performances. The two jobs may not even afford them their lives. Even though the *dalang* (*wayang* puppeteer) may be seen as the main character, a *wayang* show is always conducted as a celebration for a birth, a promotion, a birthday, engagement proposal, village ceremony, etc. In other words, he would not perform without another person commissioning him as an addition to the various forms of social rituals mentioned above. The person commissioning the performance thus comes from a higher social class.

However, these people do not debate between each other regarding their respective positions. My basic speculation is: Feudalism is nothing new in their lives. The hierarchy of kings and his people, as well as the illusion of kingdoms as defender of peace has successfully been maintained even today. Therefore, society does not

have anything to demand—it is as if all of their rights have been fulfilled. As such, the entire constellation of artists—workers—in this *wayang* performance develop a certain sense of equality. They are a part of society. They are in peace. They are people with a particular competence; the art of entertaining. How can we then come to the conclusion that joy or happiness is absent from art practices in Indonesia?

Perhaps Yuliman's statement only makes sense in the context of "top visual art"<sup>5</sup>. Particularly, the top visual art around 30 years ago. It is true that there existed a so-called reformation after 32 years of 'silent' dictatorship of the new order regime and years after the reformation almost two decades ago. Afterwards, however, amongst the middle/upper class Indonesians, the idea of equality, togetherness, or egalitarianism has been acted upon as if a dream come true. Truth be told, even now we have not yet reached a mutual agreement on the idea of applying democracy and how the state should function. Hence all forms and activities that present openness as a principle and a glimmer of democracy is oftentimes hyperbolically celebrated. Happiness is considered as the symbol of freedom from certain demands. It also offers the illusion of doing things because we enjoy it, are delighted by, and choose to do it—as the opposite of being forced to it. Everyone competes to offer this "feel good" feeling in the diversity of things they "offer" (be it political ideology, religious belief, lifestyle, food, or even housing complex).

One of the primary functions of language is self-expression and communication. Aside from the layers of issues apparent in valuing artworks that tend to drown us in debates about institutions and the institutionalization of art concepts, what remains as an element that (always) needs to be seen, read and studied is the artist.<sup>6</sup> Garibaldi created the Terhah language as one of his experiments in art making as he was fascinated in following the development of Esperanto at the time. Made by L. L. Zamenhof in 1887, Esperanto is the reference point for constructed languages. Though so, it was not the complexity of construction behind the language that drew Garibaldi's attention, but rather the media to which it was spread; from forums, comic books, posters, etc.

Garibaldi immediately shared Terhah language to others once he completed the early stages of its development. The fact that this language was created out of a mischievous intent, as I suspected earlier, requires further analysis. The notion of mere mischief (may) mean that that this language may be considered free from political/practical ends, especially agendas that intend to influence its end users (such as product advertisements, political campaigns, religious evangelism, etc). This sort of mischief provides the peers who use Terhah the opportunity to play roles in the development of ends, functions, as well as purpose behind Terhah. This openness creates a common ground between its creators and its users and thus opens up possibilities of a shared ownership. The delightfulness, joy, happiness and participation of those peers who use Terhah is rooted in the illusion of equality and democracy.

Terhah language's dissemination within Garibaldi's social sphere is interesting when accentuated under the conceptual framework of Suka Hardjana; art practices in Indonesia cannot be separated from the societal rituals they take place in. "If we talk about the relationship between art and society, whether it be art within a society, or art for the society; we become confused whence we try to understand art from a Western perspective. This does not mean that the West is erroneous, but perhaps we have different approaches. [...] It may be true that Western history contains a certain preponderance of separation between art and the society to the point that art then acts a distinct entity in relation to society. [...] Our mistake is in our attempts to mimic or construct something that may be considered *ars nova* or *art*: creating art

that is distanced from its contexts. In our context, this is the kind of art that is separated from its society, art that is separated from rituals and art that is separated from social intercourse. We become alienated. Such art does not exist here. Art is always related to social contexts, religious contexts, or is always related to some form of context. On a phenomenological level, its context is society. So it is not an art form that stands by itself.”<sup>7</sup>

User participation in the distribution of Terhah language may be regarded as a shared effort to transform it into a daily life ritual. It is not an issue of whether or not life in dialogues only exist within the confines of their own usage. Therefore, I would like to propose a speculation: Support from Terhah users is an effort to bring art back to our own context, art as part of our daily lives in Indonesia—or perhaps the whole part of the world considered the East. Art that is a part of its society’s life rituals.

My speculation is that the peers who utilize and disseminate Terhah language do so in placing art back within its position as daily ritual. My speculation is built on the foundational assurance that we have become saturated by the certain recent predominances: There are a number of terms that have been absorbed from foreign languages that have been placed in art practices around us as if such practices were similar. In reality, deeper analysis may reveal that such terms have always been birthed by much more specific contexts. As such, even though terms may be used definitively with regards to a number of art activities, such contexts always differ.<sup>8</sup> The differences in contexts entail differences in backgrounds—social, political, economical, cultural, etc. Different contexts, needs, ways of thinking, working methodologies, choices in materials, stances, as well as working procedures result in major differences. The differences may become so significant that it would be more accurate for us to establish novel terminology to describe such developments. Like language, terms are made to communicate a number of agreements or understandings regarding a particular concept in an easier manner.

Is such an effort one that is conscious in nature? I feel that it is not and that it is not needed. As Hardjana has brought up, art in Indonesia is always related to its society, and is always related to the daily lives of its people. The effort to reengage art practices to such a societal scale may have been caused by an intuitive longing to return to a number of artistic forms that make sense and are entrenched in our social lives. Wait, are we not talking about art? Before we attempt to redefine art, allow me to ask a question, what art are we talking about? That is for me a relevant question before we begin the discussion of recognition systems.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> KERAFA, Gorys. **Komposisi: Sebuah Pengantar Kemahiran Bahasan** (Composition: An Introduction to Language Fluency, 9th edition). Ende, Flores, Indonesia: Nusa Indah, 1993, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>2</sup> SUGONDO, Dendy. In **Pidato pembukaan Kongres Bahasa Indonesia IX** (the opening speech for Indonesian Language Congress), Jakarta, 28 Oktober – 1 November 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> In the context of current market, those who may be described as users are those people who have the competency of personifying those things that person purchases and does not act as a mere fulfillment of his ends, but also with their own lifestyles. This initial idea is actually derived from law theories. Read BENKLER, Yochai. **From Consumers to Users: Shifting the Deeper Structures of Regulation Towards Sustainable Commons and User Access**. Published in *Federal Communications Law Journal* Vol. 52. USA: George Washington University Law School, 1999-2000, hal. 561-579

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- <sup>4</sup> YULIMAN, Sanento. **Dua Seni Rupa** (Two Visual Arts). Essay for Symposium Nasional Seni Rupa (National Visual Arts Symposium), at Surabaya Arts Council, Indonesia, July 1984.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Seni rupa atas' (top visual art) is taught in schools and have no practical function; meanwhile 'seni rupa bawah' (bottom visual art) is dominated by self-taught artists, and is considered to play more utilitarian functions, and tends to have a certain position amongst its society. More about this, read: HASAN, Asikin. **Dua Seni Rupa: Kumpulan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman**. Jakarta, Indonesia: Penerbit Yayasan Kalam, 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> "When a curator hangs it on the wall of a museum, it "becomes" a work of art. [...] Simply put, the agencies of the art world—academe, media, the gallery/museum network, the art market, State cultural bureaucracies, connoisseurs and collectors, publicists and dealers, culture industries—send off to their publics the "signals" of art, locating them within the proper institutional scheme, and ingraining in them the appropriate aesthetic reception, disposition, or attitude to accept and include some things as art and reject and exclude others as anything but art. **It is in this context that our notions of art are constructed, validated, reproduced, and disseminated to "others" whom we think must be guided by the same principles.** [...] In short, this education has made us part of an art world that privileges specific norms governing and regulating the production of art. This is why it has become almost second nature for us to judge the artistic credence of something as if that something were "naturally" artistic or non-artistic. What we have forgotten or what has been hidden from our "sight" is that these judgements are just constructions of a particular culture and of an industry of culture. And there are other cultures that would construe art in different terms, in different scales and harmonies. Who is to say that their standards are any less valid? **It is not only the concept of art that must be analyzed, however, but also that of artist.**"
- Excerpted from FLORES, Patrick D. Teaching/Learning the Humanities in Other Words/Worlds (Part 2). Reading materials for Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the University of the Philippines at Diliman, 2010. (Highlights added.)
- <sup>7</sup> SUNARDI, ST; SUPRATIKNYA, A; dan PRABAVA, Ardian. **SUKA HARDJANA: Manusia Anomali Tanpa Kompromi** (Suka Hardjana: The Uncompromising Anomaly). Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Sanata Dharma University Publisher, 2014, pp. 31-35 (Seni dan Masyarakat/Art and the Society).
- <sup>8</sup> I am personally bothered by the popularity of certain terms such as participatory art or communal art in recent times. We may blame Claire Bishop, **Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship** (New York, USA: Verso, 2012), for this. The sorts of engagement (public) that has been given value—up to the emergence of a dichotomy between those who are actively involved and passively involved—truly cannot be applied to any social condition in Indonesia. First of all, there is no funding body (whether it be from government nor the private field) that supports the birthing of such forms of art. Secondly, coming back to what Hardjana introduced, art in Indonesia always exists from its social contexts; even though there exists no practical function, it always contains non-materialistic functions.
- If we wanted to look backwards, since the 1970s, efforts to create individual terms to define art practices in Indonesia have always been there. *Seni Lukis Mistar* (literally: Ruler Painting), for instance, was in the 1970s an effort to translate art in a disciplined manner as was done by Prof. Sudjoko Danoesoebroto (1928-2006) and in art was published by Adjat Sakri, Mochtar Apin, Sanento Yuliman, G. Sidharta, and A. Subarna in the **Daftar Istilah Seni Rupa** (List of Art Jargons) (Bandung, Indonesia: ITB Publisher, 1985); etc.