After 1965: Historical Violence and Strategies of Representation in Indonesian Visual Arts

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Introduction

In the early hours of 30 September 1965, an attempted coup was foiled in Jakarta. General Suharto then assumed control of the armed forces and, in a radio broadcast, stated that he had saved the nation from a ‘communist threat’. Suharto and his followers used the spectre of a communist-led takeover as the rationale for protecting the state and instigating or countenancing the mass murder of at least half a million alleged communists and their sympathisers. Hundreds of thousands more were imprisoned or detained. In March 1966, Suharto officially succeeded Sukarno as president and initiated his New Order government (1966–98). During the 32 years of Suharto’s regime, the discourse of ‘communist threat’ became a master narrative—a canon from the state-generated ‘potentially endless exegetical discourse’.¹ This narrative established the New Order regime’s legitimacy and served an essential

function in the protracted period of political ‘stability and order’ and economic growth. Further, during the regime’s 32 years of power, cultural production largely supported this official narrative by producing and reproducing it through artistic creations such as films, literary works and visual arts.²

Suharto’s New Order was characterised by the control of all aspects of government, especially their official version of how they came to power. The representation and discussion of the anti-communist killings was especially censored and controlled throughout their long rule. Their version of the ‘communist threat’ and the language used to describe it had far-reaching consequences, many of which had little to do with historical truths being revealed or concealed.³ Fifty-five years after the killings, while successive Indonesian governments have attempted to respond to the crimes and human rights violations of the New Order period, the subject is still controversial and highly sensitive, with the result that the representation of the anti-communist killings is fraught with ethical and moral imperatives.⁴ The massive scale of the violence is compounded by many Indonesians’ collective desire to move on and the instrumentalisation of the topic by the state and mass organisations. This has resulted in ongoing communal resistance to any suggestion that communism might return. These factors make it nearly impossible, and even undesirable, to discuss the violence of 1965–66 in contemporary Indonesia, even within the language of ‘logic and evidence’.⁵

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Indonesian Visual Arts and the Anti-Communist Killings

Indonesian artists certainly have not remained silent about the anti-communist killings. Even before the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, a small body of artworks already engaged with the subject matter. The works represented a range of responses to the events, from joy to criticism, such as A. D. Pirous’s painting *Mentari Setelah September 65* (*The Sun after September 65*) (1968) and Semsar Siahaan’s work *Penggalian Kembali* (*The Excavation*) (1993), a site-specific installation shown at Taman Ismail Marzuki during the ninth Jakarta Biennale.⁶

For many contemporary Indonesian artists whose works engage with current political issues, such as environmental destruction, gender critique and human rights violations, testimony often lies at the heart of the artist’s message. Artists used powerful visual strategies to represent the hidden mass graves, express stories of forced abduction and give voices to the silenced victims of 1965–66. Artists who gained prominence during the 1990s, such as Dadang Christanto, FX Harsono, Agung Kurniawan, Arahmaiani and Titarubi, highlight the importance of their body of works as forms of testimony and witnessing or, to be more precise, the processes by which the past is remembered and represented in the present through artistic practices.

Testimony through art becomes essential, indeed vital, to fill the gaps where truth and its supporting legal evidence are often called into question. It is also significant because, in the face of campaigns by mass organisations against justice, remembrance and reconciliation for the survivors of the mass killings, Indonesian visual artists and activists’ visual strategies become crucial.⁷

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However, given the weight and emphasis placed on one artistic trope to represent a complex historical event whose effects are still being felt across time and generations, some questions remain unresolved: what is made visible, what is concealed and what is obscured by specific kinds of artistic production? Further, how and in what ways do these artistic works continue to unravel some of our assumptions about the role of 1965–66 in the present? In the attempt to answer some of these questions, we need to reposition the role of testimony in Indonesian contemporary art and its impact.

For the current generation of younger scholars in Indonesia, there is a new source of research. This is oral history, particularly those accounts that emerged around and since 2015, the year of the fiftieth commemoration of the mass killings. This was enabled by the emergence of materials that had previously been inaccessible to researchers, the publication of biographies by former political prisoners and the amount of time that had passed since the event.8

Most importantly, of the relatively few visual materials from the immediate aftermath of the 30 September event, most were produced and circulated by the perpetrators for propaganda purposes. This includes the infamous film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Treachery of G30S/PKI, 1984, directed by Arifin C. Noer) and various military operation images found in Indonesian military museums. The propaganda and subsequent tight military and state control over the visual material concerning one of the worst atrocities in Indonesia’s modern history explains why most Indonesian artists place oral history and testimonies from the survivors and witnesses at the heart of their works. They do so in various ways, including reimagining the events based on ethnographic research, creating (counter)-memorial works, or digging deep into their personal and collective memories. For example, inspired by a story about a roving photographer in his hometown who took photographs of alleged communists before they were interrogated, Dadang Christanto adopted the story and developed it into several series of works for the *MISSING* exhibition at Wei-ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Figure 9.1: Dadang Christanto, *MISSING*, 2018.
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas. Image courtesy Dadang Christanto and Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

The exhibition featured several series of works with the drawing series of portraits entitled *MISSING* dominating the exhibition space. The artist explained that the drawings visually referenced work by the French Iranian photojournalist Reza Deghati in documenting displaced children in various refugee camps in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide (1994).\(^9\) The artist later reflected that he wanted to shift the focus from his narrative to the victims’ stories and testimony (Figure 9.1).

The act of referring to factual reality through the use of testimony allows Indonesian visual artists to act as historians but still leaves room for the imaginative evocation of the events of 1965–66 in ways that are unavailable to the historian. For Christanto, the portraits represent an imaginary visual archive, not known individuals, but unrecorded, anonymous victims and survivors. The artist’s familiarity with, and use of, photojournalistic visual strategy reveals his ongoing search to make sense of the historical violence that claimed his father when he was only seven years old.

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The emphasis on testimony exemplified by Semsar Siahaan’s and Dadang Christanto’s bodies of work illustrate the continuing trauma of the 1965–66 events.\(^\text{10}\) The trauma represented through the artworks refuses to be historicised and relegated to the past. As Cathy Caruth has argued, to be traumatised is to be possessed by an image or event. It continues to drive towards a compulsion—forms of re-enactment by those who did not experience the original events—in response to the trauma experienced through intergenerational transmission. At the same time, as an aesthetic category, testimony is also composed of bits and pieces of memory that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, or events that are in excess of our frames of reference.\(^\text{11}\) Given that testimony cannot provide a total understanding of the past, the enterprise of truth telling through works of art seems an impossible task.

### Identification: Bystanders and Perpetrators

In the relative absence of a methodology to examine the representation of historical violence and trauma in Indonesian art history, I turn to works by Holocaust studies scholar Ernst van Alphen, who suggests possible ways to examine the complexity surrounding the visual representation of historical traumatic events. Van Alphen alerts us to the tension between the representation of documentation, including archival material and oral testimony, on the one hand, and identification on the other.\(^\text{12}\)

In Indonesia’s context, so far, artists have responded to the 1965–66 events with a strongly felt need to represent the victims, believing that the role of their artworks is to reveal and amplify the repressed truth. Indeed, the trope of testimony and witnessing in engaging with the anti-communist killings of 1965–66 has recently been perceived as representing a lack of control over the future or, in some cases, an ongoing sense of victimhood.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) Interviews with Agung Kurniawan and LIR Collective, December 2019, Yogyakarta.
More problematically, within the context of the intellectual debate on memory, the widely held view is that remembering is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing. So widespread and emphatic is the current conviction that remembering has both private and public virtue that some theories have emerged that state that even victims of traumatic experiences must be helped to speak the horrifying truth about their past—to ‘speak the unspeakable’. In writing about the processes of recovery from trauma, Judith Herman, a renowned clinical psychiatrist, stated that telling the truth about the past is held to be both a personal therapeutic value and a public value of overwhelming importance.\(^\text{14}\)

However, as Paul Connerton, a social theorist, points out, forgetting should be considered a strategy to construct a new identity, achieved by constructing newly shared memories drawing on, among other things, a set of tacitly shared silences.\(^\text{15}\) In this context, some artists have noted that there is a lack of space to acknowledge silence (or forgetting), resilience and the emotional complexities in the collective memory of 1965–66.

The artists discussed in the following section explore the ambiguity surrounding history, memory and individuals in the context of 1965–66. Awareness of those events has begun to extend to the younger generation, which includes children and grandchildren of survivors, as well as non-family members, who want to recover the truth of what occurred in the past. They seek to understand the experiences of relatives, of family disruption and of trauma. Others outside the family circle wish to comprehend this stain of historical violence that haunts contemporary Indonesian society.

Indonesian artists who are second- and third-generation descendants of the post-1965 survivors are, theoretically, in the position of being unwilling post-facto bystanders. Thus, they may, theoretically at least, choose their forms of identification as bystander, victim or perpetrator. In his work on choice of identification, van Alphen argues that representation in art traditionally uses strategies that promote identification. Yet the reverse is not the case. Identification can be directed outside the realm of representation. He notes: ‘Soliciting partial and temporary identification with the perpetrators makes one aware of the ease with which one can slide


into a measure of complicity’.¹⁶ This could be the case with the historical amnesia surrounding Indonesia’s anti-communist killings. In the artworks that have been discussed so far, identification (full or partial) is generally solicited from the position of the victims. For example, Christanto’s works discussed above evoke pain to elicit empathy from the audience.

Yet, to address the complexity of the collective memory of 1965–66 and its impact, some Indonesian artists chose to shift the identification away from the victims and direct it instead to bystanders and even perpetrators. For example, the immersive theatre performance *Gejolak Makam Keramat* (*Turmoil at the sacred grave*, 2017), directed by Agung Kurniawan and Irfanuddin Ghozali, engaged the audience as actors and not-so-innocent bystanders. The play involved 13 actors from KIPER (Kiprah Perempuan or Women’s Activities), a group of women survivors of the 1965–66 events based in Yogyakarta. In consultation with the actors, the directors constructed the play such that the audience was physically involved—from sitting on the stage alongside the actors to joining in the dialogue. The audience was then given instructions to sing or chant to build a sense of atmosphere. As the directors explained, the play’s interactive nature was designed to capture the interest of the younger generation in the audience so that they would want to know more about the anti-communist killings.¹⁷ While the play shifted the focus away from victimhood towards survivor narratives of resilience, it was also able to make visible the role of the community in shaping the perception and reception of the historical violence by soliciting the audience’s participation in the play (albeit unwillingly).

Although not quite at the expense of representation, Patriot Mukmin’s mixed media work *Reminiscence of 98* (2019) depicts the artist’s self-identification with Indonesia’s New Order president, Suharto (1921–2008). The video and woven photography work exhibited in Salihara Gallery, Jakarta, further illustrate the complex entanglement between documentation and representation. Mukmin (b. 1987), a graduate from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Craft at the Bandung Institute of Technology, has primarily worked with photography and painting, particularly exploring the formal quality and materiality of the medium.

In 2014, Mukmin began creating a series of works that incorporate images related to the New Order regime, in particular to the 1965–66 mass killings. Mukmin’s woven photographs first came to public attention at his solo exhibition *KUP: Titik Silang Kuasa 66–98* (Coup: Crossroads of power 66–98), held 21 May – 25 June 2015 at Lawangwangi Creative Space, Bandung. The exhibition explored the beginning and the end of the New Order regime framed by the artist’s partial understanding of Indonesia’s political history. According to the artist, as someone who grew up during the late New Order period, his works have been driven by the gaps in his knowledge of history and collective memory in post–New Order Indonesia.\(^\text{18}\)

The work *Reminiscence of ’98* takes the form of a 58-second stop motion video and a wall work made of several photographs woven together to form two large images. The stop motion video uses short frames from the making of the wall work and is accompanied by two audio files. One is of Suharto reading his resignation speech on the eventful day of 21 May 1998 and the second audio file is a recording of the artist reading the same statement (Figure 9.2).

Mukmin’s *Reminiscence of ’98*, centred on one historic moment in Indonesia’s history, appeared both intimate and jarring. In contrast to the tired and elderly voice of the former president, the artist’s voice sounds melancholic even respectful—though it is not clear whether the respect is for the person or the historical moment that he re-created. The large wall work, where we see Mukmin’s self-portraits merge with the image of Suharto’s final minutes on Indonesia’s collective television screens, speaks further of this ambiguity. The work consists of 60 still images from the stop motion video, woven with an iconic image of Suharto reading his resignation speech at the Merdeka Palace. The artist merges the images by measuring and precision cutting each image before carefully weaving them together. We can still discern the artist’s individual frames, shot in the act of reading from the front, the side and partial close-ups of his lower face, before they gradually merge into the darker part of the larger image. The result is a tightly woven image that produces a lenticular effect: different images depending on the audience’s perspective.

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Mukmin was 11 when the speech was televised, the scene seared onto his memory without full comprehension of the context of the momentous event. Suharto’s carefully designed long-term technological and economic development plans earned him the name Bapak Pembangunan (Father of Development). Yet, his presidency was also characterised by authoritarianism, rampant corruption, nepotism and gross human rights abuses. He is now held largely responsible for the anti-communist killings and crimes against humanity committed in East Timor, Aceh and Papua during his presidency. His resignation was preceded by weeks of rioting, culminating in looting and a wave of violence against many Chinese Indonesians, including the rape of hundreds of Chinese-Indonesian

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women in May 1998.\textsuperscript{20} Ironically, for many Indonesians who have experienced the democratic and economic uncertainties of the post–New Order (or Reformasi) period, the 32 years of relative stability provided by Suharto’s regime are remembered with a degree of nostalgia.\textsuperscript{21}

Significantly, Mukmin’s work was exhibited at Komunitas Salihara in Jakarta, an independent art and culture space established by some of the most vocal opponents of the New Order regime. The exhibition of a work that depicts the artist’s partial identification with the former dictator in such a space is intriguing, but perhaps more instructive of Mukmin’s own experience with the New Order regime’s end. His video installation appears to focus on the tenuous understanding of the history of the violent past that was beyond the memory of many young Indonesians, but without offering any resolution, as often demanded by artworks dealing with human rights violations or a difficult past.

While there are no fixed ‘commandments’ as such when representing historical violence in Indonesia, it is implied that the violent events should be treated respectfully, solemnly and in a manner that acknowledges the victims and survivors’ rights. The works of Kurniawan, Ghozali and Mukmin discussed here do not fit perfectly into this mould. By shifting modes of representation towards identification with bystanders and perpetrators, their works cross boundaries, perhaps not in terms of their art but rather in their remembrance of the events and the precarity of their witnessing.

The Forensic Imagination

As Indonesian artists began to feel the weight of testimony and witnessing, some artists began their investigation into testimony’s materiality by exploring the use of archives, objects and the agency of dead bodies. The following section discusses works by two artists, Rangga Purbaya (b. 1976) and Yaya Sung (b. 1986), to examine recent developments in representing


the anti-communist killings of 1965–66, particularly the use of archives. The affective impact of these strategies is increasingly mobilised, not only in public, media and political representations of violence, but also in the processes of memory formation, memorialisation and musealisation.

In their seminal work *Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics* (2012), Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman noted a turn from the era of witnessing towards forensic aesthetics as a new cultural sensibility, ethic and political aesthetic whose implications and influences quickly overflowed the boundaries of their initial forums. The authors moved forensics from the juridical field to how we understand and represent political conflicts, whether in media, political debates, literature, film or the arts. The following discussion on two Indonesian artists’ works follows Weizman and the Forensic Architecture group’s directions where the intersection between art and forensic methodology opens up a discourse about truth.

Rangga Purbaya (b. 1976) is a graduate from Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI, Indonesian Institute of the Arts), Yogyakarta. Purbaya is also a member of Mes 56, a photography collective based in Yogyakarta. Since 2015, Purbaya has used photography as his primary medium to create four series of works that explore the anti-communist killings of 1965–66. Purbaya’s first series deals with his family history: his grandfather, Boentardjo Amaroen Kartowinoto, was seized in 1965, disappeared and is presumed dead. *Stories Left Untold* (2015) is a documentation series using objects belonging to his grandfather and portraits of members of his family. A text accompanies each image to explain the object’s origin or, in the case of his family members, their memories of Boentardjo (or lack thereof). The first series is a journalistic impression emphasising personal and familial stories of loss, longing and hope from the different individuals.

The second series, *Investigating Boentardjo* (2016), sees Purbaya assume the role of an archivist. He meticulously collected his grandfather’s extant documents from family members—certificates, official documents, diaries and photographs—and displayed them inside two glass vitrines. The artist retraced his grandfather’s life through the artefacts to understand


the person as well as his family history. As an intimate look into a past life, however, the installation is clinical in its presentation. The artist places the smaller photographs on the right side of the bigger documents, creating a grid system that allows the audience to ‘read’ the installation from the official documents to the images on the right, with the images adding further support to the contents of the documents. For example, Boentardjo was a member of Barisan Tani Indonesia (BTI, Indonesian Peasants’ Front), a farmers’ union linked to the Indonesian Communist Party. The relevant section shows Boentardjo’s membership certificate as well as photographs of Boentardjo working with his colleagues.

In the third series, *Letter to the Lost One* (2017), Purbaya shifts the focus from his own narrative to that of others who also lost family members in the violence of 1965–66. The artist invited his friends and collaborators from the *Living 1965/1965 Setiap Hari* collective exhibition to write a letter addressed to their missing family members. He transferred the letters to the walls of Mes 56’s space, effectively turning the house into a memorial to the victims. In 2018, Purbaya was invited to Gwangju for an art residency. He exhibited *Letter to the Lost One* there and displayed the letters in a darkened room lit only by UV lighting. In addition, Purbaya also included audience participation in the exhibition by inviting them to contribute to the letter-writing project.

The fourth series, *Landscape of Deception* (2018), comprises 12 photographic images of rural and urban landscapes. Some of the buildings were shot on the exterior or from the street, with one image showing a corridor with doors leading to the adjacent rooms. The buildings are covered or obscured by plants or, in one case, by street vendors. The rural landscapes are more diverse, with images of ponds, beaches, forests, fish farms and caves. In this fourth series, the colour and black and white images are not accompanied by the captions or texts that Purbaya used in his earlier series. The images can be simply seen as depictions of the idyllic countryside or a small town in Indonesia, in the style of salon photography.

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Yet, one image from the first series makes a return in *Landscape of Deception*. It is the image of Luweng Grubug, a limestone cave with an opening of a vertical shaft, 50 km south-east of Yogyakarta (Figure 9.3). The tourist attraction is famous for its natural beauty. It has been featured in various local and international nature television programs, but is also alleged to have been one of the killing fields during the 1965–66 violence. Purbaya states that his grandfather is rumoured to have met his death at this site. Suddenly, the idyllic landscapes take on a different meaning. They are, in fact, trauma sites or ‘contaminated landscapes’—sites that contain human remains that have not gone through the funerary rites and burials of individuals who die a natural death. These people died under suspicious circumstances and were probably murdered.

Purbaya’s four series of works engage deeply with the anti-communist killings of 1965–66. While the series starts with the familial as its subject matter, it develops gradually into an investigation and eventually becomes a memorial. Compared with other works that focus on testimony, Purbaya does not rely on drama to convey his messages, but he still makes the same appeal for truth. The processes of unearthing, displaying and manipulating ‘forensically’ acquired material, such as the objects and documents that once belonged to his missing, presumed dead, grandfather, elicit a strong
emotive response. In addition, Purbaya’s use of UV lighting in the second series’ iteration in Gwangju recalls the technique used in forensic investigation to reveal unseen or hidden biological traces.

Certainly, the use of objects and photography in contemporary art to examine the relationship between memory and image is not new. Artists from across the globe—such as Doris Salcedo, Christian Boltanski, William Kentridge, Nalini Malani, Nadiah Bamadhaj, Brook Andrew and FX Harsono, whose works often deal with difficult pasts—have used objects and photography as a mnemonic strategy or as a memorialisation of the victims. In this regard, Purbaya follows a long tradition in contemporary art practice of engaging with the complexity of memory, particularly about the aftermath of historical violence. However, his fourth series offers a potentially different path from a conventional representation of historical violence.

The landscape that Purbaya portrayed in the fourth series, according to the artist, is a reflection of his anxiety about ‘blurring contexts’. He explains:

A beautiful location, sometimes storing a completely different history. Behind the subtle and graceful scenery, hidden dark stories, gloomy and heartbreaking, far from their appearance and designation. It could be that the beauty was intentionally made to obscure the dark history, and was carried out by the government or the local community with the aim of diverting the past from us.

One of Indonesia’s dark history is Tragedy 65. At that time, hundred million innocent humans were killed and their bodies were thrown away in places far from the crowds and covered by scary stories to avoid people to come. But today the situation has changed. These places also changed. The places were opened as tourist places, inviting people to come. These places turn into stunned, organized and well-maintained space. Far from the grim and gloomy impression which the murder took place. History is no longer discussed. People then forget. And today we don’t realize it. In fact, we are often lulled by the elegance of the place, so we never question it again.

It turns out that beauty can also deceive us.25

Purbaya’s statement records how sites of trauma in Indonesia—sites where the killings occurred—are being rapidly subsumed by relentless urbanisation in the country’s most densely populated island, Java. As these trauma sites are built over, the affective aura that was their trademark is lost. Victims, survivors and their families are unable to publicly remember and mourn ‘Tragedy 65’ in Indonesia and, in the absence of official memorials, natural sites are the only physical places where there are indexical traces of their loved ones. Further, the unmarked graves and killing fields in Indonesia are often protected by animistic, primordial belief systems that identify such places as haunted. Ironically, this prevents the sites from being used for other purposes. Yet, as the artist states, such protection is slowly disappearing.

Despite the pessimism, Purbaya’s *Landscape of Deception* series highlights the distinction between monument and memorialisation in the context of Indonesia’s historical violence. As a solid and physical site, the monument is constructed out of the need to mark a gravesite as an easily discernible, localised and developed space. Memorials can be understood as something less solid, being movable or temporary. They can even be physical acts including performative actions, such as reading aloud, collective recollection and so on. Purbaya’s photographs come to embody the latter in the form of posthumous memorials. The landscape and the buildings no longer serve as a background to human activities. Instead, they become a powerful presence. The vast body of water, including waterfall and waves crashing on the beach, and the vegetation that engulfs the caves and buildings in Purbaya’s photographs represent this force.

Because there are very few physical monuments to remember the victims of 1965–66, Purbaya’s landscape series becomes a space of remembrance, in particular of places that already exist in the collective memory—that melt inconspicuously into their surroundings, unplanned, pragmatic, vernacular and used by local communities for silent communication, intended for an as yet undetermined future investigator.

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In comparison to Purbaya’s trajectory from personal history to posthumous memorialisation through artefacts and landscapes, Yaya Sung’s (b. 1986) work directly engages with a critical historical document that exposed one of the biggest myths created by the New Order about a progressive women’s group, Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women’s Movement), affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party. Yaya Sung is a graduate from the visual communication program at Pelita Harapan University in Indonesia. Because of her interest in photography, in 2013 she began to participate in several group exhibitions in Jakarta before eventually joining a program on critical photography practices organised by Mes 56, Yogyakarta. Sung has since expanded her practice into multimedia installation and performance art.

The seven-channel video installation titled *The Future (Lies)* (2018) is part of a group exhibition #perempuan (#women) curated by Santy Saptari in Melbourne, Australia (Figure 9.4).

**Figure 9.4: Yaya Sung (b. 1986), Jakarta, The Future (Lies), 2018.**
Mixed media installation, variable dimension. Image courtesy the author.
The installation consisted of seven flat screen televisions on vertical frames. The screens were arranged in a semicircular formation facing away from the gallery entrance. Positioned slightly apart from the screens, a large portfolio and a pair of white gloves sat on a table. The portfolio was the artist’s research journal that also contained copies of archival materials that the artist had consulted for her work.

The main document that Sung referred to was an article entitled ‘How Did the Generals Die?’ by the late Benedict Anderson, an eminent scholar of Southeast Asia. Anderson analysed and translated into English a forensic report by the medical team that performed the autopsy on the bodies of the six high-ranking Indonesian officers who were killed in the early hours of 30 September 1965. Anderson’s analysis highlighted the fact that the bodies showed no signs of torture. The official New Order version luridly described the bodies as being in a mutilated state, with the eyes and genitals particularly disfigured. The New Order version accused the members of Gerwani of desecrating the bodies and this was used as evidence for arresting and torturing members of Gerwani. It is also the basis for ongoing vilification of the Gerwani women as cruel and depraved. Sung’s work aims to highlight the findings of the autopsy report that showed that the bodies of the officers were, in fact, intact.

Revealing the agency of the dead is, of course, the basis of forensic science as a discipline. It is a trope, bordering on a cliché, that the remains of the dead can ‘bear witness’ to what has befallen them. This trope frames forensic evidence collected from the body as a kind of post-mortem testimony. The forensic scientist or archaeologist merely acts as the interlocutor who allows the dead to speak. Sung’s seven-channel video installation visualises the figure of a speaking corpse or, rather, seven corpses.

29 Interview with the artist, January 2019, Jakarta.
The videos depict seven rotating naked male bodies, accompanied by mournful music played on a loop. Working with a team of make-up artists, videographers and talents, Sung carefully and meticulously reconstructed the bodies’ condition based on the forensic report. Her team vividly re-created bleeding gunshot wounds and bruises that had resulted from blunt trauma injuries (Figure 9.5). In this particular work, ambiguity and nuance are not Sung’s primary concern when depicting the impact of 1965–66. In her artist’s journal, she states that Gerwani’s gender equality and education achievements are still very relevant for contemporary Indonesian women. She feels strongly that her work should speak about the injustices that many Gerwani women experienced during the 1965–66 events. In this context,

32 Sung interviewed and recorded the song by female survivors of 1965–66 events: Pujiati, Sri Sulistiawati, Lestari and Sri Suprapti, who currently live in Waluyo Sejati Abadi Retirement Home in Jakarta. The artist slowed down the tempo of the song to accompany the slow rotation of the bodies. Email to the author, March 2020.

33 Sung explains that the talents were fully informed about the ideas behind the video and most consented to continue, except one who withdrew due to the nudity content. Conversation with the artist, January 2019, Jakarta.

the bodies in Sung’s video provide the viewer with an osteobiographical story of the violence inflicted upon them, thus giving the dead a sense of agency. Based on the artist’s belief in the bodies’ ability to convey a ‘truthful’ account of events, namely the details about the circumstances and causes of their death, they are evidence of the lies that the New Order regime constructed about members of Gerwani.

Purbaya and Sung’s works share the aim of revealing repressed truths about what happened to individuals during 1965–66. They also utilise a forensic imagination to create a space where third and fourth generation Indonesians can connect with one of Indonesia’s darkest periods of history. In their works, the forensic imagination does not follow strict scientific methods, but rather creates a space to present evidence. Yet, the evidence provided by the objects and documents that they employ in their works is not intended to close down discussions or conversations about the truth. On the contrary, the evidence has been chosen to stimulate discussions about the construction of ‘truth’ during and after the mass killings in contemporary Indonesia.

Conclusion: Challenges of Representation

In the artworks discussed in this chapter, the anti-communist killings of 1965–66 are portrayed through various strategies of representation: installation, drawing, performing arts, photography and multi-channel video work. The trauma of the historical violence still endures in Indonesia’s collective memory, largely because there are so few opportunities to mourn the many Indonesians who lost their lives, and because of the lies, censorship and propaganda so successfully maintained during Suharto’s New Order regime.

Artistic representations of the anti-communist killings are thus seen as an enabling space to help Indonesians remember and commemorate the events, with varying degrees of reception. Through their works, Indonesian visual artists have positioned themselves alongside the victims and survivors to tell their stories and reveal the truth. This is exemplified in the practices of Dadang Christanto and the late artist–activist Semsar Siahaan, whose works have been exhibited in Indonesia and overseas. Christanto’s body of work has been seen as an emblematic representation of the violence of the anti-communist killings and its legacy in contemporary Indonesia. As Christanto delves deep into his personal memory, namely the loss of
his father, to speak about human rights abuses more globally, his works, in fact, encapsulate the tension between history and imagination. As artists strive to represent the hard facts of history, they also tend to turn towards figurative strategies to represent the violence. The representation of violence has been argued to be an aestheticisation of suffering and another form of violation of the victims, which some artists have argued has led to the trope of loss and further victimisation.

Other Indonesian artists have chosen a different mode of art-making, turning away from literal representation. The collaborative project and artworks by Kurniawan, Ghozali and Mukmin retain the testimonial framing of their content, despite some artists’ distinct disillusionment with the approach. In addition, the discursive role of the witness can be extended into the materiality of the archive and non-human actors, such as seen in the works of Yaya Sung and Rangga Purbaya. In the latter, the reorientation speaks to the political dimension, documenting human rights abuses and the necessity of reconsidering the ethics of secondary witnessing. Images that depict the traces of people, rather than people themselves, have the potential to avoid ethics-based accusations of exploitation and aestheticisation of suffering while retaining emotional and moral impact. Paradoxically, Sung’s video installation returns us to the realm of trauma. Trauma’s original meaning as a physical wound is reconstructed on the bodies of seven male talents to manifest the high-ranking military officers’ violent deaths. Simultaneously, Sung’s evidence-based work also potentially evokes psychic trauma that could haunt the audience.

The term ‘After 1965’ in the title of this chapter speaks of the broader impact of historical violence in Indonesia, not only on history, collective memory and legal aspects but also on the artistic imagination. Nonetheless, art that documents traces of conflict and political violence, can, and does, go beyond merely grappling with the ethics and politics of witnessing. Drawing on identification and forensic imagination theories, as proposed in this chapter, does not diminish the role of testimony in representing the voice of the victims. Instead, it aims to initiate a critical reconsideration of the complex entanglements between testimony, trauma and representation, particularly their divergent modalities and purposes. Indeed, meaningful and imaginative remembering is necessary for a survivor to move beyond crisis, and the process of remembrance is not only an individual but also a social process.
This text is taken from Living Art: Indonesian Artists Engage Politics, Society and History, edited by Elly Kent, Virginia Hooker and Caroline Turner, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LA.2022.09