Broadly speaking, my art practice can be divided into two parts: one during the New Order, from 1975 to 1998 under the Suharto regime, followed by a minor transition during the Reformasi (Reform) period after the Suharto regime fell, around 1998–2002. During the period since 2003 until today, I have taken as subject matter my own identity as an Indonesian of Chinese descent, a group that has experienced much discrimination. My most recent project was about the history of ethnic Chinese on Java from 1947 to 1949.

During the New Order my focus was on social critique, and I made artworks that challenged the policies of the repressive New Order. During the transition period, I saw enormous change in politics, society and culture. These changes impressed me, especially the freedom of expression, which I had never experienced during the previous regime. But these freedoms also brought up questions about my own identity as an Indonesian of Chinese descent. In Indonesia, ethnic Chinese are still seen as foreigners, even though they came to the archipelago in the seventh century.
Art as a Form of Resistance

In the beginning, in 1975, I took up social and political issues with the intention of experimenting with the search for a national Indonesian identity. Several young artists came together as the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (Indonesian New Art Movement [GSRBI]) to consider national identity this way.¹ We began with a consciousness that Indonesia, being so geographically and culturally enormous and diverse, struggles to present a cultural identity. Culture that is located in a particular place cannot represent Indonesia more broadly. Meanwhile the political situation was the same across Indonesia, under a government that implemented militaristic and repressive policies. Thus we thought we should address these social and political issues by using them as a representation of Indonesia.

As I became more involved in sociopolitical issues, I became more aware that I could not only look at these as mere inspiration for my art. I could no longer just interpret a situation or condition without becoming involved in that situation myself. I became increasingly involved with NGOs and activists who opposed Suharto’s policies.

These interactions gave me a new consciousness that the work of an artist came with a kind of responsibility to society. So, the creation of art could no longer only happen in the studio. Interactions and collaborations between disciplines, with society and research became an inseparable part of my creative process. Consequently I was swept along in the current of resistance to the Suharto regime, and it was quite stressful to oppose those repressive policies.

There were political controls in place to monitor all social activity in order to ensure there was no political activity. This was known as depoliticisation, and affected all areas of life, including, of course, art and education. Artists were afraid to make work with social themes, political opinions, social criticism or even art that depicted the lives of the lower classes and the economic and social problems they faced.

¹ Editors’ note: this period in Indonesian art’s development, and in Harsono’s career more specifically, is addressed in a contemporaneously written chapter by Sanento Yuliman and republished in translation in this book and also in Supangkat, Chapter 6 (this volume), and Turner, Chapter 7 (this volume), the latter in relation to Harsono’s artworks for GSRB.
In facing this resistance from artists, the government announced restrictive values that could be used to sanction or even gaol artists. This policy was a kind of value system that was termed ‘national identity’. There was no clear definition for these values, but the system was government regulated. National identity was used as a parameter for evaluating works that attempted to criticise sociopolitical situations created by the government. National identity could be pulled any which way, like a rubber band.

There were a number of artistic disciplines that were closely monitored by the government, particularly forms of art that were easily understood by society, such as the verbal arts. This included theatre, music and literature. If these kinds of practices expressed criticism it could create a social movement. Hence these were seen as dangerous forms that threatened the government’s development program.

It seemed that art was not subject to these restrictions, so long as it was not a poster at a demonstration or a comic book that raised political consciousness, and so long as the artwork was exhibited indoors. Semsar Siahaan took his paintings as a placard to a demonstration. He suffered a broken leg after a soldier stomped on him. But apart from that, usually
artwork tends to use a lot of metaphors or symbols that are difficult for the military to understand, so they were not particularly attentive. But intelligence officers did visit my solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1994, two days in a row. Fortunately, they did not find me there.²

Performance art became the new medium, seen as an effective resistance to the government. Interaction and collaboration with activists produced new participatory art forms. Artists began to mingle with the community and collaborate, and community-based art began to appear.

I worked with activists to run workshops for labourers, making alternative media to disseminate information on sociopolitical issues. In 1998, when the May riots erupted in Jakarta, I became a volunteer in a team working with female victims of violence.

---

2 Editors’ note: in the full version of this story, recounted in a 2010 article published in the New York Times, Harsono describes how these spies are also unable to understand the work because it depicts hands using sign language to spell out DEMOKRASI. Harsono is quoted: “I know a government spy came to the gallery to see the work, asking questions about the meaning, but I wasn’t there, so I got lucky. The person in the gallery lied and told him he didn’t know the meaning of the work” he said, laughing’. Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, ‘FX Harsono’s Rebellious, Critical Voice against “Big Power” in Indonesia’, New York Times, 12 April 2010, accessed 18 March 2021, www.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/arts/12iht-Jessop.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&sq=fx harsono&st=cse&scp=1.
Research as a Creative Platform

The research I do is not in keeping with methodologies from the social sciences. My research is a mix between anthropology, sociology and ethnography. It is also not intended to seek methodological validation as scientific practice. My research tends to focus on the search for a very subjective ‘truth’ that I could use as a basis for the creation of artworks. This truth is intended to provide a limitation so that there is no distortion in the interpretation of the problems that might then be transferred to the artwork.

In 1985, when I began to work with NGOs, I gained some understanding of participatory research methodologies. This knowledge was not about research methods, but rather about how we see the community as an entity that is positioned as an equal of the researcher. Participatory methods depart from a place of empathy. Empathy is the basic capital an artist has in meeting ethical issues. Without empathy, the community is just a voiceless object. The artwork also becomes dry. The artist is not the centre, or the most authoritative subject. Artists must in fact learn from society. When we ‘go into the field’ the distance between artist and community or social group must be reduced through dialogue, interaction, merging and direct, intense engagement.

Figure 10.3: FX Harsono, Korban Merkuri 1 (Mercury Victim 1), 1985.
Photographic print, dimensions unknown. Image courtesy the artist.
In my creations I see that reality is no longer subjective or imaginative only, because the issues in society are very real. This transformative and participatory social science made me conscious of breaking down the falsehoods that protected the controlling regime, critically exposing them through ‘systematic work’ that differs from the working patterns of studio artists.

The Reform Era (Reformasi)

During the New Order era under the Suharto regime, not just anyone could establish a media company. The establishment of a company involved with media and information required permission. This also required tight screening. News was censored. There was no freedom of speech. But after 1998 the political situation changed, and this was a huge contrast with the previous era. Anyone could establish a TV station and print media without any government permissions.

Many things amazed me after the fall of Suharto. Suddenly I could see free speech, people could criticise the government. I had never experienced this during the previous 32 years. Advances in information technology meant information was easily shared through the internet. Computers helped to raise my awareness of digital reproduction, which inevitably became a medium for the creation of artwork. I felt a kind of culture shock.

I tried to look at all of this critically and a number of my works addressed this situation. Behind these amazing shifts, I also saw that change swallows up its own victims. I saw Chinese people fall victim to these changes. When a massive riot broke out in Jakarta around May 1998, most of the victims were Chinese. Hundreds of Chinese-owned shops were burned and looted. Chinese women were raped. At that time, I became a volunteer in a gender-based violence team called ‘A Volunteer Team for Women Victims of Violence’. I began to wonder and ask myself, ‘who am I?’ I began to question my own identity, history and roots. I acknowledged that I was an Indonesian of Chinese descent. But when I looked more closely, what was the culture that I practised in my life as an Indonesian of Chinese descent? I was aware that I knew nothing of Chinese culture, and I also did not understand the Javanese culture I was born into. Then I knew that I was a ‘peranakan’ [Indonesian-born] Chinese who no longer understood my root culture; I knew that was part of a Chinese diaspora.
Untold History

In my search for my identity I could no longer find it through culture, so I tried to examine my family’s history. I began find out who my father was and what he did, and who my mother was. My father was Oh Hok Tjoe, with the Indonesian name Hendro Subagio—a portrait photographer who established the ‘Atom’ studio in Blitar. But that was all I knew. I couldn’t investigate my family history further, because there was so little information.

There was one interesting thing I found in the documentation of the photos my father took. The photo [on which the painting depicted in Figure 10.4 is based] had been kept in the guest room of our family home for decades. The album contained black and white photos of the excavation of the remains of Chinese people killed in 1948 around Blitar, the town where I was born. These photos recorded images of human bones and skulls that had been freshly removed from the ground. On the photo a handwritten caption in white ink indicates the location and date the picture was taken, and the number of victims found.

![Figure 10.4: FX Harsono, Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2, 2009.](image)

Diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread, 200 x 350 cm. Image courtesy the artist. The work depicts the artist with his parents as a child.
The skeletons of these massacre victims were then reinterred in a mass grave in Karangsari village, Blitar. These movements of human remains still often occur, for all sorts of reasons. In Chinese belief systems, the ritual burial of family members and ancestors must be done appropriately, so that the lives of the deceased’s descendants now and in the future can be better.

My father and the other volunteers in the group searched for, exhumed and then re-buried the victims that they found. These activities were coordinated by a Chinese community organisation called Cung Hua Tjung Hui, by instruction of the Jakarta Branch. The victims were Chinese people who had been massacred from 1948 to 1949 in Blitar. In a number of texts, the massacre was described as an effect of the Dutch Military Aggression, which was in contravention of the Linggadjati Agreement of 1947. When the Indonesian army used guerrilla tactics and a scorched earth policy in the defence against the Dutch army, the Chinese became the target of violence as a result of political disunity and the actions of opportunists and interlopers who took their chance in an uncertain economic situation.

This research continued until I began to look at the historical stories of Chinese massacres in other periods, and in other places across Java. A number of mass graves of victims can be found in Muntilan, Yogyakarta, Kediri, Nganjuk, Pare, Caruba, Tulungagung, Wonosobo and Purwokerto. This research took place from 2009 to 2018.

One of the artistic strategies that I used in this project was the ‘reproduction’ of signs that I found during the research. I duplicated these signs directly, then constructed a composition with them, adding my personal interpretations. This method is in fact not new to my artistic journey. Since 1975, I have utilised everyday objects as found objects and then linked them in order to create meaning within the context and issues I want to address.

---

3 Editors’ note: in modern Indonesian society, the act of moving grave sites and human remains also takes place due to decreasing space in city cemeteries. The exhumation of graves happens when land is re-designated as a commercial zone. In addition, the development of cemetery complexes as ‘property’ in suburban areas has affected an increase in moving graves.

4 Editors’ note: these sites are spread between Central and East Java (see Map 2).
This ‘duplication’ and reproduction method is also obvious in *Rewriting on the Tomb* (2013). I performed this at the sites of mass burials, draping a white cloth over the headstones and then taking rubbings with a red crayon. The result was a frottage of names in Chinese script, cast clearly and in high contrast.

**In the Exhibition Space**

As well as being a performance and resulting in the creation of an artwork made through frottage, this action was also my pilgrimage to the victims. I titled this event *Berziarah ke Sejarah* (*A Pilgrimage to History*, 2013). Critic and curator Agung Hujatnikajennong said that: ‘this configuration created tension between a sense of solemn mourning and the scientific approach of the researcher or historian looking for information’.\(^5\)

Hendro Wiyanto said ‘these two works are a sublime effort by Harsono to give a place for “the other” who has been silenced and marginalised’.\(^6\)

---

\(^5\) Agung Hujatnikajennong, ‘Kita Ingat Maka Terjadilah: Sejarah dan Ingatan dalam Kesenian FX Harsono’ [We remember and so it happened: History and memory in FX Harsono’s art], in the exhibition catalogue to Harsono’s solo exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo, Bandung 2014.

Figure 10.6: FX Harsono, *Berziarah ke Sejarah (Pilgrimage to History)*, 2013.
Still image from video performance [13:40 minutes]. Image courtesy the artist.

Figure 10.7: FX Harsono, *Monumen Bong Belung (Bone Cemetery Monument)*, 2011.
Installation with 202 wooden boxes, perspex, electric lamps, paper and photographs, 270 x 270 x 270 cm. Image courtesy the artist.
In presenting my work, I always think that the public is the most important part. That’s why I try to think about how to communicate my work. But this does not mean that the aesthetic value is unimportant. For instance, interacting with the public or reproducing signs as an effort to use a language that is easily understood.

Another work is the installation Monumen Bong Belung (Bone Cemetery Monument, 2011), which was made by arranging wooden boxes in a circle that resembled a chimney. In each box was an electric candle lamp, the Romanised name of each victim and a photograph. These boxes were a representation of the kind of altar Chinese people often have in their homes. The work was intended to rebuild a memorial monument, and to pay respect to the victims.

After seeing and experiencing several incidences of violence directed at ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, particularly the major riots in May 1998 in Jakarta, I felt disappointed, angry and sad. These events combined with the discovery of the photographs and archives of the massacres made me even more keen to ask, why do ethnic Chinese become victims every time there is social change? This question made me then look at the issue differently, in that there was no sense of revenge or anger in taking up the issues of discrimination or massacre. What I hope for this project is that it can remind us all of a dark history that was never recorded, so that dark history does not continue to be forgotten.

Although I have finished the research, I will still produce several more works, a documentary film and a book related to my research and this unwritten history. Aside from this long-term project, I am also delving into the stories of my own history, names and collective memory, or my personal history and its connection to collective history.

---