

Artist's Studio as an Open Space

In June 2021, weathering the trepidation and concern over possible dropped internet connections, poor Wi-Fi signals and technological glitches, Artist Melati Suryodarmo successfully connected from her studio by the village at the northern part of Surakarta, Indonesia with Melissa Quek, Head of the School of Dance and Theatre at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. Suryodarmo gave her keynote presentation over Zoom to the international audience of the *Arrhythmia: Performance Pedagogy and Practice*. Suryodarmo's ability to span the continents with her practice that is based in both Germany and Indonesia, and the Singaporean audience's familiarity with her work made her an ideal person to share the generative effects of a pandemic-induced social and cultural arrhythmia.

The following is a curated version of the 90-minute keynote as conversation that charts the shifts in approach and development, temporary or lasting, that were brought on by the pandemic in Suryodarmo's practice as an artist and a pedagogue. Critically, the arrhythmia that the conversation with Suryodarmo highlights is one that calls for a change in rhythm caused by the pandemic and is actually something that artists may want to cultivate. She notes the importance of slowing down and discusses how contact with nature can assist the body and mind to adjust and adopt this new rhythm. Reflecting too on her study of trance, which began before COVID-19, she emphasises the need she found to rethink the body as an empty entity that can be cleansed and filled. The conversation is a timely reminder that our bodies are affected culturally, physically and spiritually, and performance practice may indeed be a way to balance all these facets of our embodied experience and craft.

Melissa Quek

Please tell us a little about your practice and how it has changed due to the pandemic.

Melati Suryodarmo

I would like to share something that I have been doing for many years, but has not been publicised much as I have been doing it just as part of my daily life. But during the pandemic, it has become an increasingly important centre of my work.

I would like to introduce a little bit of my background. How I became an artist and how as an artist I prepare or train myself for my practice to share my knowledge and what I can do for other artists. I used to live in Germany for more than 20 years and between 2011 and 2013 I decided to go back to my home country, my hometown Surakarta in Solo, central Jawa, Indonesia and I thought, something must change in my life.

My practice began in the 90s. It was not an unpopular practice but nowadays performance art is becoming more and more popular. And I'm happy that there are many new performance artists all over the



Melati Suryodarmo, *Ale Lino* (2007), performance
 Gross Gleidingen
 Photo: Reinhard Lutz

world, and also that this genre is shared or adapted or intertwined with other practices like dance and theatre. Performance art was always an inspiration for many artists, but it was not sustainable in terms of how the knowledge of performance art should be carried on. I think most of the art schools in the world today do not have a special class [for performance art], unlike the school where I was in Braunschweig. We had the special department for performance art where Marina Abramović was. And I think in the art education systems we have running now, we have not left space for learning performance art in the proper way. Performance art should in no way to be a side dish to open up the next exhibition or an act of entertainment. Nor is it a practice that is only used to protest as part of practical politics or demonstrations. Performance art, for me, is a way to deliver ideas, to deliver spirit, to deliver thinking.

In 2012, I decided to open my studio in Solo, for classes, workshops and also performances. I like to grow with the activities of my studio and I like to share and hope it slowly impacts more on society.

It is not very easy to come back to my own country within my own cultural context of 20 years of living abroad. I needed some time to adjust; to understand. I never really want to force my students to follow what I'm doing but, rather, I would like to encourage them to develop their ideas. I was thinking maybe through a laboratory—through the method of sharing and gathering and exchanging discourse. So from this very simple

situation, I would encourage young people to develop something that is not accepted or not permitted at school. So I provide my space Studio Plesungan, as an alternative education space that is free. Everything is for free here, and it is based on exchange. That means those who are meeting here meet because they need to meet. When we do an event, it's not about curating-like in conventional festivals, I invite artists to come in the spirit of sharing, learning and being open to the exchange of experiences.

Melissa Quek

Could you speak more about the idea of slowing down. When you are in the lab and going outdoors there is a different sense of a rhythm in the way your students relate to each other and to nature, that seems to affect the way they learn and create.

Melati Suryodarmo

With COVID-19, we were all suddenly surprised and gradually stopped our regular activities. Schools were closing, all my projects were postponed mostly indefinitely. Some projects were postponed, and then postponed again, and again, and even when we planned something we had to have to have a plan A, B, C, and so we are forced in these conditions to shift our rhythm, to shift our way into a different pace, a different kind of timing. We are forced to sense the time in a different way, and so I was thinking at the beginning of the pandemic: "okay it's a good time for me to rest." I've been traveling a lot, and doing a lot of things in the last five years. So in the beginning of the lockdown in Indonesia, it was two weeks after the opening of my solo exhibition at The Macan Museum in Jakarta, it was a full year of preparations - and the opening was very successful, but after two weeks, we were forced to close and stay at home. At the time I was thinking: "Okay, I accept, I believe it is something good just to stay at home and avoid the virus." I wondered what to do with so much time. I thought of planting vegetables, so I built a greenhouse from bamboo.

[And so I thought:] Another working activity is coming, another rhythm is coming. What should I do in my studio? I cannot do my festival, I cannot do my workshop, and so on. The shifting of rhythm is very interesting. The idea of making activities is a little bit slower, but somehow time is very precious. We work more intensively in one-to-one meetings and conversations. So last October, I brought students on a pilgrimage to nature.

I offered to take them to the south and find some water. Go to the ocean, get some fresh air to get back to ourselves. Basically, I learned this from Marina Abramović because she had workshops every year for us in the countryside in Spain or in France to learn how the body connects with itself using the help of the energy of nature. Because most of us live in a town, and we are always rushing, we are always held by activities and schedules and so on, and I brought them to an undiscovered time and place. Walking slowly and doing a little exercise but mostly just facing the ocean, or just being quiet, writing down something and eating well. We did a lot of beach activities. The beach was very empty, of course, no tourists.

I believe that nature has the power to help us gain our power to regain our awareness of our being human, or in our relationship with nature and other spirits. You know, nature is unpredictable. Nature gives us a lot of messages that we are not aware of sometimes, And I think it's not

just refreshing, it's rather a retreat or a pilgrimage that brings back our connections with nature so that we get reacquainted with the signs that we receive from nature. This is what we have lost over time, especially through modernity. For example, what is the smell of the black sand? How do the ocean's waves sound? What is the smell of the leaves from the tree? What is heat? What is cold? And if you're always in an airconditioned room and then you go out of the office, and then you go out to a very hot Singapore, for example, and then you go again into the air-conditioned environment, you lose this sense of in-between spaces, between nature and your body. And I think this sensitivity is very important. And, a lot of tasks were like, "okay, let nature give you a message." And then we discuss. And most of the students receive some messages. Usually, a message that they have met before or seen [received] before. For example, it goes into personal memories, or reminding their body that it was very exhausted, but they also had messages that they haven't met or received before.

Melissa Quek

Why is talking about traditional arts in Indonesia important and what are the main differences, for you working in Asia, or Southeast Asia compared to Europe or the United States?

Melati Suryodarmo

Sometimes I think our practices in relation to the traditional arts or with the traditional culture are very ambiguous. You know, how the government offers, for example, the idea of preserving culture. But for me, it goes against the reality that culture is developing, it is something that you cannot really preserve unless it is an artifact or object that has no life.

But if culture belongs to society, and the society is growing, and the growth is unpredictable, the result of the growth can be seen in the future, and so we are in the ongoing process of establishing culture and tradition in Indonesia. We were a long time under colonial rule and even after the independence of Indonesia, I think there is a long process to regain our national identity. Even if we have not fully regained our national identity, traditional culture is still very close to our daily practices, both in our domestic life and our society: that means the way we think, the way we do things, the way we move, talk and eat; everything that is related to our daily culture is still very strong here. And so, I think, in combination with the spirit of redefining identity in the new order it becomes something that is important and a strong part of our existing culture. And that's why I'm offering my younger colleagues a revisiting of the idea of tradition in a different way, because they are living in a very contemporary style, living in a way that is fashionable to do at this time, and most of them can also dance traditional dance. So how do we connect our contemporary behaviour with our traditional bodies when we are doing traditional dance? How do we revisit the knowledge of the traditional dance without our contemporary body? How do we constantly go from riding motorbikes and then stopping, and then rushing to put on makeup, and then dance very slowly a Javanese Dance? So, for example, this kind of thing is very interesting and probably is not happening as much in other countries.

Melissa Quek

How was the slowing down on the pilgrimage to nature different from the way dancers slow down in some traditional dances? Or is it the same?

Melati Suryodarmo

Yes, the slowing down is not according to the music or the rhythm that comes with the dance that leads the dancers to slow down—it's more how



Melati Suryodarmo, *Sisyphus* (2014), performance
The Jakarta Theatre
Photo: Indonesia Dance Festival

they open themselves up to be with their rhythm. I was not telling them “okay, you have to move slow,” except for during one walk away from the place we stayed to the beach which we took very slowly. When they do performances I just remind them to be aware of what kind of rhythm they want to be in, and the slowness is what they adapt from nature. This is quite a special experience for them because normally their rhythm is not according to the language of nature with the intention that you are a part of it, part of the unknown territory. But you are part of an existing territory too. So I think this is how to raise the sensibility of the power of nature. Otherwise, I think we get lost if we are not connected or train our bodies to be familiar with nature.

I’ve seen my daughter growing up and witnessed her growth physically, mentally, intellectually and I said, I just want to be with her to see a better future. I feel like I don’t want to be much older than my daughter in spirit, so I tried to learn her world, to learn and to know her world, her generation, her millennial perspective on the world and not to think that what I’m doing is better and the young people need to know how I’m doing it or experience it as I experienced it. So I think what we are lacking is the opportunity for young artists to experience their lives by themselves. Every day, I feel like a newborn baby because I’m very curious to know the world and to discover new knowledge or to learn something that I haven’t seen before, and to know how to deal with it and at the same time, to maybe be more critical. I think this may be how we learn



Melati Suryodarmo, *Sysyphus* (2014), performance
 Studio Plesungan
 Photo: Daniel LA

to protect ourselves from industrial speed or the speed of production, the speed of a click in apps and gadgets. How can we stop this? How can we deal with this in a wise way? It is challenging being young.

Melissa Quek

You've spoken about how an exploration of being present in both time and space is important to your practice. What is your approach to space and spatiality, and how do you work with younger performers and dancers, regarding this, when they might be more used to performing and practising in a box?

Melati Suryodarmo

Yes. Okay, I think, for example, a student in Solo, if you're not from a family who lives in Solo, you rent a small room and maybe it's like three by four, including the bathroom, and very narrow and then you go to school, the school has a lot of space, but also a lot of students, everything is a little bit crowded here. So our sense of space, I think it is how we learn from nature. How nature can provide a space without defined limits. But I think it is very important also in my performance that the term space is not necessarily solely the physical, but it is also the space that we create from our inner being. For example, we don't know what the limit is for communication: the limit is felt when we turn off the internet; of course with the internet there is like, "wow you can see my face, you can see, you can hear me,"—you can probably understand what I'm talking about, but what kind of space exists between humans—for human relations here. What is this cyberspace that is virtual space? What is the

limit of this? Is this nature? You know? And I think this becomes part of nature of course, because we are connected to all this—the frequencies and waves, and all these things that we don't see. But I would still like to believe that nature has the power to train us to understand the limits of space too. It's my personal experience that performing in the landscape is the most difficult part because then we become very small—in that space our being, all we are as a human, is very small compared to the power of nature a life that is so big, the world is so big. And also, then [we] return to our ego and presence as a human. And I think that's the most essential thing to do with what you do as an artist.

Melissa Quek

Your work uncovers aspects of the body's mundane everyday struggle. How do you use performance as a vehicle to communicate what the body is thinking and feeling?

Melati Suryodarmo

Oh it's not the body that I'm communicating, it's the world that is carried or attached to this body. So performance art, it completes my idea about art. It's not about making an object that is final, is done and put somewhere to be admired. I love when the art is continuing, when the body is present carrying the life of a world and I think maybe as a vehicle: as a means to transport or to transfer the unpredictable space, unpredictable area, the new matter that probably just appears during that time and that space. So this experience that both the performer and the audience can have is the most important, especially during a live performance. And I think also, in the dance, right? Dance and theatre—it's always special to see them live.

You know, not all my performances are performed only once. But all my performances have this one-time quality because it is the quality of a live performance. So every time I do a performance, even if it is the same concept and supposedly the same performance, it is always one time. It's always a different experience. It's always a different situation, different atmosphere, and it depends on everything. That is considered "live." And so, early on, many artists refused to repeat performance work, but I think I'm not one of them. I like to re-perform and re-do my performance because my life has changed. So I did *Butter Dance* 20 years ago, it will be different when I perform it next month in Jakarta 21 years later, with maybe a little bigger in volume and at an older age. So my ageing body is doing *Butter Dance*. How does it feel? What is the substance of the work? It is still speaking; it's about the ups and downs of life, it's about the precision of live events, about danger and risk. It's an ongoing happening in my life.

Now live streaming is a little bit different, it's much reduced. We are now, I'm afraid, used to live-streamed performances. I'm going to do live streaming for the first time in my life, on the 12th of June [2021]. So since we have been planning this performance for one year, after consideration I decided I'm going to do this because I also want to have the experience. How does it feel? The delivery of the presence all coming together in one constellation is going to be very important.

Because I think first, "I do not want to disappoint so many people in Jakarta. They've been waiting for one year (due to the pandemic)." I will be back after two weeks to do live performances of a longer duration with very strict regulations and health protocols. And some are performances that I really would like to do for my heart [sic], and I've been waiting

for a long time because the last time I did this was in 2009 and I really want to experience this performance again, but because it's using a whole raw liver of a cow it cannot be done indoors, so it cannot happen in the museum. So we decided to do it as a livestream. I will do it in my outdoor studio platform and it will be a three-hour live stream of the performance. I'm also very curious and excited. I don't know how it will feel but I will try it [after] one year of long consideration.

Melissa Quek

How will you get the sense of lightness and presence across in a live stream?

Melati Suryodarmo

Of course it's the power of the camera and the cameraman and the direction, the director of photography, equipment and so on. I'm quite familiar with cameras and how to direct the camera for documentation and how best to use the camera for recording performance art, and so we will have at least two or three cameras with a switcher, and that will represent the curiosity of the public's eyes. There will be some close-up exposures. So I hope that will be enough, but you know it is not a live performance, it is live streaming. You don't see me. It's a big reduction, the quality is reduced. You don't smell the same area, you don't smell the same air, you are not in the same place. We are not together. You are not hearing with your own ears the sound that is happening.

In the performances, you always have to negotiate with your decisions. You have to adjust with your knowledge, you have to understand that a livestream is a reduction. Sometimes when you record a documentation of dance you think, "wow! I've danced and it is so powerful!" And then, when you watch the video, whoa...no energy is coming up, I cannot feel the energy and so, something is missing and that's the danger of the screen.

I'm not rehearsing for this but we're going to set the light and focus the space, then the cameraman will set the focus and so on. But I'm not rehearsing. I will just probably talk about the space, together with the cameraman on how to present it on this screen. And I will perform as if the camera is the public's eyes. I'm not exaggerating or dramatizing so that I can be seen more. No, that's very dangerous. It's very dangerous.

Melissa Quek

You were inspired by Artaud's notion of "the body without organs" while developing *Sisyphus*. Could you talk a little bit about that inspiration?

Melati Suryodarmo

Antonin Artaud was considered mentally ill but I was actually especially interested in his Manifesto because he observed the power of a body and he developed the concept of the body with organs inspired by watching the performance of Balinese dance at a World Expo. And he was very inspired by how it relates the outer spirit with the unpredictable being, or with the devil or whatever it was and how it interacts with the body, how the body is living. Usually the actor is committed to following the text, but here the body is creating the text. I think Antonin Artaud also inspired a lot of the Butoh dance practice and so that connects Japan, Indonesia, Paris, and all this knowledge in the 1930s—I think that is very inspiring. The inspiration of the body without organs encouraged me to again revisit the idea of trance. So I made a piece that is called *Sisyphus*. And I did research with a shaman who would teach us or guide us to be in the process of being possessed, and this was a session of processes that we were trained in, also in my studio here in the platform, in the night, after midnight. It is quite mystical but I asked my dancer to join me to do



Melati Suryodarmo, *Sisyphus* (2014), performance
Studio Plesungan
Photo: Daniel LA

this research with a critical mind, that we are not doing mysticism, we are learning the technique of being in a trance, and so I think that was a very special experience of how when this body is moved by energies that we haven't met before or haven't known before. This method is meant to open up the subconscious, for our subconscious to be delivered in a freer way, to liberate our hidden subconscious. So I think the idea of the body without organs is ongoing research for me, I will be continuing this and I'm always very interested to see the body as a different substance. Not only the physical body or cultural body or bodies as containers of memory, but also as an empty entity...you know, like how when it's empty, who is coming in? What is coming in? I think this, for me, is always interesting, especially in connection with the traditional idea of catharsis, of cleansing. Like all practices are actually there to bring about a balance between the human body, nature, and god.