

**Boedi Widjaja: Declaration of
Artist's conversation with Boon Hui Tan, Director, Asia Society Museum, at Helwaser
Gallery, NYC on Sep 14, 2019.**

Boon Hui Tan 0:00

For many, many years, was the fact that - his country of origin - many of the references in the works that you see are of course of Indonesia, in particularly of the New Order government of Suharto, which is also what most of us grew up with, those of us that were born after the War. And what's interesting is that his work seems to be entangled in but it's not wholly similar to, for example, in Indonesia, the very strong and continually vibrant, traditional social political art, where artists normally take off with great emotion and ethical...there's a kind of ethical charge behind the work, because they are very strongly identified with being champions on social justice. And during the New Order government of President Suharto, who appears in many of Boedi's works, many of the artists, particularly (those) coming up from the Yogyakarta school, were very explicit and very direct, and as an artist who has become for some time a Singapore citizen, what's also interesting is that he is quite different from the artists who have come out from Singapore and who have been internationally active since 2000, because his work also bears some, it bears some similarities in terms of the very, not to reduce it too much, but a kind of very urban feel of artists that are very familiar with very contemporary urban mediums, where the sort of grittiness sometimes that you see artists coming up from Yogyakarta is not.

So it's very interesting is that...and I deliberately am not using the word inspired (that we can have a PhD discussion about) but I would say (which Western critics love to use as well) I would say his work is very entangled, at this moment also in these two streams that are coming out from Indonesia the very impassioned kind of call for social justice and Singapore, a very urban, with a kind of a very steeped in the new mediums of art, very steeped in multi-disciplinary art...political but not sort of what we call framed, you know, there are many frames of distancing involved. And again, that's another PhD about why Singapore art is like that and it has something to do with the political situation. So, just to leave that with you, we are going to come back. The reason I'm being here is I think, Boedi's work is quite complex and he's entangled in many contexts. So I'm going to go back to this idea of being an artist. And what's interesting when you read when someone reads your CV, is that of course you've never started off as an artist. In fact, your training was as an architect, and more, you were dealing also with graphic design and so on so I'm gonna go back to this - why did you become an artist, and what point and what happened?

Boedi Widjaja 3:28

Okay. I didn't quite know when the impulse started. I only knew that since my school days in the university, I was very much drawn towards the theoretical, the philosophical, and the formal aesthetic aspects of the architectural discipline, more than I guess, the building sciences. And I tried to follow these impulses. After I finished school, as I started to enter into graphic design, people asked me why I didn't continue to practice as an architect; because I had friends working in architectural firms, and they didn't have a life. So I thought that you know, to be smart, I shouldn't be doing that. And in the beginning of 2000, there was a boom in the new economy. In Singapore, there were many startups. And hence, I felt that the most interesting thing to do at the time was to get into this multimedia web experience type of

creative endeavors. And that lasted for about 10 years. I, together with my wife, Audrey, we ran a graphic design multimedia design firm for close to a decade before I sort of transitioned into visual art full time. Even in the years of practicing design, I was struggling a lot with the need for creative autonomy, and balancing that with the business interests of our clients. It came to a point where I realized the absurdity of spending three hours explaining to a client why a brochure has to be designed that way and asked him questions like "what is a brochure?". And therefore I felt that visual art is a field that would better support these impulses. And that's how I transitioned to visual art. It was through that route.

BHT 6:17

The reason I ask that is if you've already heard from Boedi's responses, then you begin to get a hint of why the work is so diverse and why it's intersecting even with design, with architecture. Later, we'll get to performance. So I just want to leave that [inaudible]. Boedi is a frustrating artist to write about simply because there are so many of these things that are invoked together. So it's very difficult to speak of his work as a kind of development in the sense of oh later I started with representation and went to abstract and went to [inaudible]. It's difficult, because it's all mixed together. And I think his background, the fact that he didn't come from the arts, strictly not in the sense that we understand partly sort of explains this kind of network quality of his, his work and what he looks at. And then you've been very open in many of your interviews about how the process of being, the term I would use is the word migrant, for being a migrant. And you came to Singapore, of course as a migrant as opposed to and Jee Leong used the word, it's very different from a traveler at the age of nine because your family, your father wanted to take you out...his children out of the country of Indonesia at the moment, when in a sense, the New Order government was very unstable already and they're looking forward to the reformasi, the return of democracy and the change, a very fundamental change. And at 2012, you became a Singapore citizen.

What's interesting and you've spoken of how you actually came to Singapore as a child, and in a sense you grew up in Singapore, and that that kind of dislocation, that kind of being in the sense of forced...what we call in sociological terms of forced migration, has sort of colored your work so much in terms of what it means about being transient, what it means to belong here and not here, and to think maybe you belong somewhere but yet sort of don't and what is a home. Could you say a little bit about your reflections on this; how your personal kind of experience of migration then and in a sense moving home so many times?

BW 8:57

Well I didn't quite understand much of what was happening when I was a child, a nine year old only understands so much. And I think primarily it was a very emotional moment of having to leave my parents and leaving for a totally foreign city, not being able to speak English nor Chinese, just with my elder sister who is a year older than me, and having to live with strangers in Singaporean families. And I think that childhood experience, in a sense, very much shaped the way I imagined my journey to Singapore. In the sense that we talk about migration as having left a place and reaching a destination in a new place. But migration for me is a process of trying to reach that destination, while not quite knowing how to leave the origin and in a way you are caught in that liminal state of migrating. And that's a migrant. A migrant is someone who is constantly trying to migrate, trying to reach that place. But not quite

knowing how to psychologically do it, despite having physically been...I mean, I grew up in Singapore...

Hence, I think in the way I approach ideas in my practice and as I think about this experience, I would like to think about that act of transition as a very important impulse and because a lot of things can happen in that space. I mean that performance that I did just now with Jee Leong was titled Threshold. And the threshold is that space, is that liminal space where things happen, where things are dynamic, and things change. It's never static because you have yet to arrive at your destination.

BHT 11:45

So, on that I think what's interesting as you look around, is, you use a lot of visual symbolism and thoughts and imagery that actually is partly derived from Indonesian history, the New Order government, even though it's not something that was directly accessible to you because you left at nine, you grew up in Singapore. So why would you say a little bit about what led you to this, this kind of interrogation, because at a very basic level it really isn't imagining and recovering because you were not part of this directly connected because you have physically left.

BW 12:32

I would say that what I am interrogating by the images of that political regime, and not the actual regime as how someone will experience it directly in Indonesia. Because since I left at age nine, I could really only depend on the news or on press photos, on imagery on the TV, on the internet and so forth. And in these images, it comes with actual site, of nationhood for me. And therefore, the works that you see in this show, they are my methods of trying to break these images apart and to understand these images, in their visuality, in the way they embody certain emotions, certain histories and memories and so forth. So is it really an exploration into the mediated surface of history rather than history as somebody living in Indonesia.

BHT 13:47

And that's part of I think what separates you from, for all intents and purposes, Indonesian artists living in Indonesia who work along history. It seems, because your images are very highly mediated, and that mediation, that distancing, that framing also has something to do. It's sort of like it's echoing, you know, your personal kind of history. And I think what's also interesting is that you use a lot of whitespace, a lot of negative...you're using things in negative. Are you almost saying or are you suggesting that...that is not something that is directly accessible to you or it's veiling, or...?

BW 14:40

The negative images, they refer quite directly to the way I experienced photography as a child. The first time I held a camera was a compact one, a compact camera which held a roll of twenty-four, thirty-six exposures. And I remember that I went to the Singapore Istana during its Open House together with my mother who visited us during one of the school holidays, and I was so happy to photograph Istana. Everybody was so fascinated by this very still-standing guards at the gates of Istana, and we were trying to make him move but he just refused to move, things like that. And when we brought the camera to the photo shop and when we went

to collect the prints the next day, we were told that there's nothing inside, that it was empty. And I think that the idea of images beginning with the film, the empty film, of having things on the film that isn't visually revealed, that is visually obscured or held back, was one of the important aesthetic impulse for my negative drawings because I realized that I could try to speak a lot by leaving certain things empty. And the idea that I could re-image or re-photograph this mediated experience of migration in my childhood by first beginning with a negative image in a drawing form, and then re-photographing it into the photographs you see around is one that appealed to me because of that.

BHT 16:59

That's very, in terms of the history of an artist practice, that's a very modern kind of impulse right? To mediate it through, in your case you're very explicitly saying, through your photographic eye. What that means. And of course, then one would notice in your work, this thing about light and darkness, it is a very important kind of, German has the word, a motif, a kind of thing that keeps coming back. And then as we see with performance, [inaudible] if you just scan, you just go to this website - the whole Path. project. The use of the body, moving through space, and moving through architecture, has been very important to you. To pursue that alongside these much less ephemeral kind of forms. Could you say a little bit about why, you know, suddenly performance, which is a very ephemeral. And a lot of these works also seem to be trying to resist the ephemerality. Trying almost to capture some kind of fading away that is, it is mediated. But your performance itself is the most ephemeral. I mean, what you did just now, it's really for the people that were here. You can go home and tell people about it, but it will never be the same. It's very different. So, what, what made that and you did that, that's a very long project. It's not a kind of one-off.

BW 18:40

Well, the Path. project began in 2012 when it was commissioned by the Substation.

BHT 18:46

When you became a citizen.

BW 18:48

Yeah, that's right. At that time, there was a big debate about rights of foreigners in Singapore and hence it was a, I felt, to be a very important moment to talk about in the context of art-making. And I realized at the time, I mean one one story that I keep telling people was that I had thought about applying for citizenship for more than 10 years. And I finally said to myself and look, I'm really tired of feeling out-of-place and I'm going to make my home in Singapore. I'm going to decide that this is home. And I applied for citizenship and I was thankful that it was accepted. And I was so looking forward to the ceremony of getting my pink ID card. I was really thinking that I would finally feel at home. But it didn't happen. Instead the moment I got the card I felt even more displaced because I no longer have the reason for feeling not at home now that I'm Singaporean. Hence the Path. project began with that experience and I wanted to have...I wanted to use the Live Art format as a way to very viscerally ground myself to the site, or to the space, or to the people who are present. To be able to form a kind of immediate and direct relationship with these things and hence the Path. project began from there.

BHT 20:59

And one feature in the INSITU that was specifically interesting was that suddenly you came to a point where you were trying to research the beginnings of certain sites.

BW 21:13

Yes

BHT 21:13

Like Fort Canning Hill in Singapore, certain sites that are frequently in the academic but also popular imagination. The beginnings of certain history, as if to reference within yourself, in relation to the beginning. So, it seems to be suggesting that there is a kind of practice that as you continue as an artist, that there is a kind of an attempt to deal with this constancy of transience that you feel, right? It's not a moving, it is the after you move, you still feel that you have to...

BW 21:55

that you haven't quite reached there...

BHT 21:55

you have to fight to reach there...I just want to read that...he had been quoted in one interview something that Chuck Close said, which I thought was very illuminating to understand his work. And this is quoted by Boedi himself and he said, "As I made my home here, I would like to explore the brighter paths that I see ahead." So for a migrant and someone who is literally physically a migrant, I think that's very interesting in that it captures a lot of the mixed kind of emotions but also how you're both happy that you're here, but yet, you feel you haven't reached there and there is somewhere else to go. And your work seems to be also a kind of search for something, for these paths ahead. What I think what's interesting about Boedi's work is always about searching for this...this other thing but that is frustratingly perhaps you never saw or reached. And how that echoes through you.

BW 23:04

Yes, yes. The the idea of Path., relating from what you just said, it's really about that very personal journey. But with a focus on the walking of the path as a process, and really thinking about how that could be an artistically productive method in making artworks.

BHT 23:40

So with these kind of provocations that you have set up, I want to move on to ask all of you..if you have any questions or queries for Boedi. But just to to leave you all before we reach that part, when we talk about...and there's a lot of talk about migration, about whether people belong, with the Syrian issue and all that, it is very interesting. And Boedi's work has certain kinds of conceptual and even physical connection with these debates that we're having... that we're having now. Not just in the arts but in the realm of politics and so on, even though it is very personal to him. And the other very interesting thing is of course, is he a Singapore artist? So the migrant, this idea of the migrant, of an artistic practice that is about transience. And transience doesn't mean temporary. Transience means you're always searching for

another present. It is very interesting, and I think that is one of the things that I will say why his practice really is a contemporary practice because the safety of geopolitical containers equated with artistic containers no longer exists. That has been sundered out. And I was mentioning that when I read many of the critical works on him. If you look at the work of artists who are coming out from the Middle East, particularly artists of Palestinian background, the same kind of thing of this restless, transience comes up. So just to say that, interestingly enough, even though his personal journey as he said started...really triggered by he could say that and then what happened after this, his move...he is in a sense, dealing, connecting with something that is happening now; in other parts that have nothing, that don't touch the artist directly. It is mediated. So I just wanted to leave it as that, just to leave a point of suggesting how complex contemporary work is. That how complex artists from other parts of the world that have very peculiar and very, sometimes, very frustrating, and sort of migratory and network kind of things. But that's what makes global contemporary art so interesting. So I would just want to open up to questions from the audience for the artist. Boedi's work is very complex. Any questions?