PROJECT MUSE®

Towards Figures of Dedication, and a Flood (2015)

Tom Nicholson, Grace Samboh, Edhi Sunarso

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 1, Number 1, March 2017, pp. 221-230 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2017.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/646484>

Towards Figures of Dedication, and a Flood (2015)

Tom Nicholson with Grace Samboh

January 2016, Edhi Sunarso (Yogyakarta) passed away, leaving a layout sketch of how he wanted his casket to be positioned in his recently opened museum. He had arranged his own funeral carefully.

Last year, artist Tom Nicholson (Melbourne) and curator Grace Samboh (Yogyakarta/Medan) had a conversation with the late Pak Edhi in the presence of artist Ary Sendy Trisdiarto “Jimged” as cameraman and soundman Budi Setiawan. Tom was fascinated with Pak Edhi’s Monas dioramas and Grace was curious about one particular diorama that depicts an exchange of a very powerful letter that changed Indonesia yet no one had never seen the original until now.

What you will be reading is an abridged transcription of that conversation—which obviously did not happen in English—translated by Elly Kent and documented in video.

TOM NICHOLSON (TN): *In July 2015, we visit Pak Edhi Sunarso. I visit him with the curator Grace Samboh and the artist Jimged. Sunarso is 84, and one of Indonesia’s most eminent sculptors. He is best-known for his large-scale public monuments, commissioned by President Sukarno in the years following decolonisation, part of the creation of a new urban landscape for Jakarta, the capital of the new nation. President Sukarno also commissions Sunarso to create a vast cycle of dioramas, depicting the coming into being of the Indonesian people, for the History of National Struggle Museum.*

It's a Museum that lies underground, beneath the footprint of the Monumen Nasional, or Monas, the towering monument conceived by President Sukarno as the centre of the new nation.

[Sound: Crowd and ambience of Monas Museum; slowly put in Sunarso's museum in the making sound.]

TN: *In 1965, not long after Sunarso presents the final set of drawings to be made into dioramas, President Sukarno is removed from power. General Suharto becomes the military dictator of Indonesia, a position that he holds for more than three decades. In the months after the coup, during 1965 and 1966, General Suharto's New Order orchestrates the killing of between 500,000 and 2,000,000 communists and trade unionists across the archipelago.*

TN: *We speak with Sunarso at his studio in Yogyakarta, where hundreds and hundreds of diorama figures are created by Sunarso during this period—the early years of the New Order—and where, half a century later, his studio is in the process of being transformed into a museum to his own life's work.*

[Sound: Stop the Monas ambience. Use actual back sound from the interview.]

PAK EDHI (PE): I made almost all of the dioramas in Indonesia. Firstly, of course, Monas.

The West Irian Liberation Monument was finished in 1963. I was appointed as the diorama implementation guy then. I started working in 1964.

Sukarno sent off a group of artists. There were 18 artists who went to Japan, Korea, Europe and Mexico. They came back from overseas at the same time that the West Irian Monument was being launched. There was an exhibition, a sample of their findings from studying dioramas overseas.

After the launch of the West Irian Liberation Monument, I went home. Two weeks had passed. After two weeks I was called up by the State Secretary. What was this all about? The sculptors had all finished up. I thought, ah, they're going to pay me. Ha ha.

It was a seminar with historians and the State Secretary. I sat about five seats away from Sukarno. Then he said: "Ed, come and sit next to me."

Then the seminar was opened by Dr Amir Sutarga. He was the senior historian. He taught Nugroho Notosusanto.

Sukarno said straightaway: "You've been appointed to the team to make the dioramas." I was shocked, surprised.

“Sir, you have already sent away the artists you’ve chosen to execute the history dioramas, and I wasn’t included in that, not to mention the fact that I have never seen a diorama.”

What was his answer? “Eh, this diorama is not for me. It’s not for the historians. It’s for the nation. The visual realisation of these events from our national history is a form of dedication. A form of dedication.”

“Essentially it’s up to you. You were courageous in fighting the colonial enemy. Why aren’t you brave enough to build a diorama?”

“Oh, please do it! So long as they describe the historical events. So long as they describe the historical events.” Full stop. May I try, sir?” I answered. He replied again: “The Revolution isn’t an experiment.” Succeed or die. Survive or die. What could I say?

In the end it was a challenge for me... “Yes, sir.” Even though I had nothing. Then I left the building and contacted my friends who had been on the diorama study group overseas. Among them was Mr Saptoto and Mr Budiani, Trisno...

The Monas dioramas were to be the History of National Struggle Museum, depicting the Indonesian people’s struggle to attain independence. Up to when West Irian returned to Indonesia, full stop. Finished.

There were descriptions written by the historians. And the historians always held discussions together to decide things, to determine how the scenes should look... There were descriptions alongside the historical information, and also a conclusion about what form the diorama should take. But there was nothing concrete. For example, for the Diponegoro War, it just concluded that this was the story. After the story, there were never any images.

Then we, the implementation team, would draw it according to the description. Then we would submit it. “Was it like this, sir?” “Change this.” “Not at all.” It could be four or five times that it would be described and only then would it be okay. Four or five times to get it okay.

Sukarno said I had to be able to do it! It was from that insistence that we drew our strength and curiosity. It was from his spirit. We had to be able to do it! Had to! Must! Always had to be able!

In making these dioramas, there was no art-making process at all... Maybe only 30 per cent of the job is art. If there is any form of art in making dioramas, it would be the art of translation. There is no freedom. As an artist, if I were not aware that this was something needed for historical records, I would have been so lazy. But you have to be very disciplined. You have to consult, survey, follow what many people want, though this also means that many people will appreciate the work. Whereas artmaking is free. I can do whatever I want.

For example, Digul! I had to go there. At the time, there was no big aeroplane to get there. I had to fly to Sentani, and from Sentani to Tanah Merah we had

to take the flight five times. When we could not pass over the mountains, there were only slopes, Once, we got into the slopes and it got dark. The following day, we would try again... It was the fifth day that we finally reached Tanah Merah. From there, how do you think we reached Digul? There was no asphalt road. We had to walk through the forest with ropes. As an artist, what is all that process for?

When we finally arrived, there was nothing there. It was just forest. How could we gain the information we needed? We had to ask the people who were still alive. Far, far away from that forest, we found people who still recognised the map of the village. We made one sketch after another. One sketch, not good enough... What were the available materials? Was it wood, zinc, or what? Only when our sources said "Yes, that's right," could we leave...

GRACE SAMBOH (GS): *Does that mean that sketches were also used as a negotiation tool with your sources?*

PE: Yes!

GS: *Once your sources said okay, then you would take the drawing to the historians. At that point, could they say no?*

Well, they themselves had never seen the place. Ha ha. Like that East Javanese house. What we asked East Javanese historians which type had been used for the Palapa Oath, what it looked like? So what we saw, we sketched. We proposed it to the historian team. They themselves had never seen any... Ha ha. They learnt the visualisation, how it should look, from us.

About the composition of each event: Did it really look like this when it actually happened? Not even the historians could say anything on this. So I engineered it.

I had to face not just one single historian. I had to face a collective of historians. There were at least nine or ten for each diorama description. So, we would propose something, they would discuss things, they would advise us, we would change things. We always had to find a point where we agreed on things.

Because the diorama domes were already there, we only engineered, masterminded, created the scenes. We were putting the historical scenes in perspective. All of our made-up scenes, we would propose them to the historians. Of course, these scenes were firstly proposed in the form of a sketch. From that sketch, we would fix or change things, then turn it into figures. Unfinished clay figures. We would arrange those figures in the domes to look at the relative scale, and take photographs—the figures' composition and

everything. Once the proposed scene and the perspective were agreed, we would execute the figures...

Perspective-wise, we would begin from the part that is seen as the front. Then we would pull a line, a rope, to the vanishing point. If the scene included a building, we had to measure the proportion of human height and the building's height. So we would pull a rope from the furthest point of view.

The painter who painted the dioramas, we always had to control him from the outside. The backgrounds are of course not only figures, but paintings of spaces. We had to control things so there was balance between the figures and the paintings. We had to do this from outside the dioramas.

If the painters had painted straight lines, it would have looked tilted from outside the dome. When I say outside, I don't mean standing just outside the diorama window, but even further back from the window, about 1 metre further back. If the painters had painted straight lines, it would have looked tilted from outside the dome.

1965. Sukarno called for me. I arrived, as usual, through the security door. There was Mr Leimena, and Putragama too. We were all waiting for Sukarno. It was said that he was in Bogor. In front of the presidential palace, there were so many tanks. 10 pm. He still had not arrived. 11 pm. Still not there. 1 am. No... We waited till 2 am, and then at last we excused ourselves and left. Apparently Sukarno could not come back to Jakarta.

Only after we had left the palace did I learn about G30S, about the events of 30 September. When I was inside, I didn't know anything. I only knew that I could not get out... It was only by then that I learnt that there had been a coup by some military group with tanks and all that. I spent that night in Jakarta, in Utan Kayu, then I went back to Jogja.

When I arrived home, the outside of my house was plastered with posters. "Kill the generals ..." It was then that I learnt that there had been a coup in Jakarta. After that, I did not return to Jakarta until 1967, to install the dioramas at Monas.

After that coup of 30 September (1965), all development at Monas was stopped. Nugroho, who had been Amir Sutarga's assistant, became the historian of Suharto's New order.

All the New Order dioramas. Beginning from Tritura (Three People's Command), also Crocodile Ditch, right? They were all from photographs. But it's political, that's why I said.

What could I do as the one implementing it? Because it was all controlled by those in power. The problem is until now no one has been brave enough to be frank about the truth. They're afraid they'll be torn up. There are many who have been victims of that...

GS: *One of the critical parts of this story is the so-called Supersemar, the document that General Suharto claimed President Sukarno wrote and signed on 11 March 1966, effectively authorising General Suharto's takeover, and providing the legal basis of that transition of power and General Suharto's military dictatorship for the following 32 years. But that handwritten document, the so-called Supersemar, has never been seen. It's the subject of an important diorama at Monas. Can you talk about how you depicted this event, how you visualised the story around this document that no one has seen?*

PE: That was Nugroho directly. I was summoned. No written description at all. He was simply telling me what happened and gave me a photograph of each event. Lubang Buaya (Crocodile Ditch) came with a photograph. Tritura also came with a photograph. But for that (Supersemar) specifically, there was no photograph. Nugroho wrote me an order.

Historian General Nugroho Notosusanto's version was that Suharto was at the Bogor Palace when the generals met and gave him the Supersemar, the 11 March Decree. It was the Bogor Palace. Out the front. In the reception space. Yes, because it was on the front steps, wasn't it? Ah, the three generals on the steps. The last figure was Pak Harto at the top. This was when they submitted Supersemar. But whether it was really the Supersemar decree, nobody knows.

Pak Imron told me... Suharto wanted to come, but there was a flood. They installed a new pump. I went to Jakarta, then I heard the news that Suharto wanted to inspect Monas. I came back to Jakarta. But it had already been installed...

After that, Suharto wanted to officially open the Museum. Eh, no... he came with his assistant and the Monas project officer. But not with Nugroho. I had to be there, ready.

Suharto headed straight for the three new dioramas: the Three Demands of the People; Lubang Buaya where people were digging for corpses; and Supersemar...

He was stuck in front of the Supersemar. He stopped and... "This did not happen here! Edhi! This happened at home. Please come to my house with my assistant. When? Tuesday, maybe? Please bring Edhi to my house, show him where I received the Supersemar!"

And then his assistant took me to his house in Cendana. Suharto was wearing pyjamas. I was there with his assistant. He showed me where he was lying when he received the Supersemar. He was acting as a model of himself. He lay

on the bed and showed me where his gun was, how the cupboard was positioned, etc.

So that was Suharto's version. It's different to Nugroho Notosusanto's version! Ah, because I asked. Which one is true, we'll never know!

GS: *Wow! So the figure on the bed in that Supersemar diorama is not Sukarno? I have tried asking many people, especially those who are really critical about the New Order, that of course begins with the Supersemar. They all thought it is Sukarno that is lying on that bed. Sick. Or tired. Or forced to give up the country...*

PE: It is not Sukarno who is sick. It is Suharto.

The actor's version is different from Nugroho's... The actor was Suharto... But is that true? We don't know, do we? Because in Nugroho's version, Suharto was healthy. Where is the proof? Where is the decree, the Supersemar? There never was one. Who is brave enough to say there was a decree and what it sounded like? No one, right?

Who knows what it is? Whose sin is it then? It's a very big sin against the Indonesian people.

After the flood, Nugroho was no longer standing beside Suharto. In fact, I was the one who gave him the news that Suharto said his version of the Supersemar diorama was to be changed.

So now, who knows about the Supersemar Decree? No one knows. No one knows whether that's true. Perhaps it is... right... hah!

Ah, now if the figures are already standing, can they be made to simply lie down again? No, they can't. That's a different position. Much less Suharto. The standing-up Suharto receiving Supersemar, to be replaced with Suharto lying down. Can Suharto be made to lie down? Not possible.

GS: *When we first met Pak Edhi, he did mention that the diorama-making process involved a lot of bohong and tipu. Bohong and tipu are both Indonesian words that mean "lie". But bohong is more used to point at white/small lies, lies by kids who are afraid or surprised, the kind of lies that are more spontaneous and easier to be unfolded. Meanwhile tipu is used in legal language for lying, meaning that it is more like a formal or carefully planned lie...*

GS: *I think I now understand why he had to differentiate the two. He used bohong when he talked about perspectives (both technically and historically), meaning that the visual implementation of the struggle is arranged,*

engineered, composed... On the other hand, tipu is totally something else. Tipu points to facts being chosen, used and organised according the needs of people in power. Those who once have stood up cannot be made to lie down easily...

[Sound: The workers behind Sunarso's museum getting louder and louder as we walked out. Incorporate Monas' crowd sound and also make it go louder and louder. As we walked through the different sizes of Sukarno and Suharto sculpture that not intentionally stood across each other, we realised that realities and scales are to be questioned again and again.]

BIOGRAPHY

Tom Nicholson was born in Melbourne in 1973. He obtained his PhD from the University of Melbourne in 2014. His works have been exhibited in several cities, including Comparative Monument (*Ma'man Allah*) at Milani Gallery in Brisbane; Cartoons for Joseph Selleny at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Indefinite Substitution at Geelong Art Gallery; and Fractures: Jerusalem Show VII in Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza. In 2013, he received the Paul Guest Drawing Prize.

Grace Samboh was born in Jakarta in 1984. She lives and works in Yogyakarta. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in advertising in Jakarta, and Masters degree in art studies from Gadjah Mada University. She has a prominent presence in Yogyakarta's art scene—including as a curator for the Jogja Biennale 21 Years Retrospective in 2009, and as executive director and curator for Langgeng Art Foundation from 2010–11. In 2011, she co-founded Hyphen, a research and development office for art and culture.

Edhi Sunarso (1932–2016) was an Indonesian sculptor and public artist known for numerous monuments and landmarks found throughout Jakarta. President Sukarno's most trusted sculptor, he was the figure behind the Pancoran statue and the Selamat Datang Monument—or welcome monument—in Jakarta. Edhi Sunarso was commissioned by President Sukarno to create a diorama about the awakening of Indonesia. He collected research materials by visiting some historical locations in the country and interviewing witnesses and people involved in the events. He processed the materials into several images, which were then selected by historians handpicked by President Sukarno. He taught sculpture at Yogyakarta State University (formerly IKIP Yogyakarta) and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta.

Tom Nicholson with Grace Samboh, *Towards Figures of Dedication, and a Flood* (2015), video, selected stills and transcript