

Curatorial Statement

FX Harsono: The Chronicles of Resilience

By Leeza Ahmady

FX Harsono's new exhibition *The Chronicles of Resilience* encompasses the artist's efforts over the past five years to document significant events, people, and circumstances surrounding massacres committed against Indonesians of Chinese descendants across villages and cities of Java from 1947 to 1949. To this day, these violent, traumatic episodes, which destroyed thousands of lives, remain largely obscure in Indonesia's history. No official acknowledgment, nor reconciliation, has been offered by the government, despite some positive recent policy changes against discrimination and a more politically engaged younger generation inside of what is Southeast Asia's most populous, multiethnic, and religiously diverse country.

Harsono first learned about the mass killings of this period through an image archive belonging to his father, who had photographed the exhumations of known mass-graves in the early 1950s, which were organized by the victims' families and associations to properly re-bury the remains in cemeteries. The locals referred to the reburied remains as "Bong Belung," literally meaning "graves of bones." Since 2009, Harsono has been visiting these burial sites and villages, directed by his father's detailed written captions on photographs he had taken over 60 years ago. Harsono interviewed village and community members, eyewitnesses, and even a few of the survivors and their children.

These interactions opened doors to other resources and organizations that provided Harsono with information to conduct surveys and find more mass-gravesites at other locations. Recording every step of his journey in a variety of formats—photographs, documentary videos, drawings, paintings, performances, and mixed media installations, which he has exhibited both inside and outside of Indonesia—Harsono has been piecing together fragments of a dark, emotionally-charged puzzle with the tenacity of a patient seeking a cure from a doctor. Only Harsono is the doctor, registering tales never told before, asked about, or rarely spoken-of, so that we may somehow seek our own cures from the hundreds and thousands of killings, displacements, and traumas that people across the world are suffering today, from Palestine to Afghanistan, to Syria, Kashmir, Yemen, Nigeria, the Ukraine, Iraq and elsewhere.

Over these years, Harsono discovered eleven new mass-gravesites, some simply designed while others elaborately maintained and visited as part of yearly festivals by the local Chinese communities that care for these sites. Each chapter of his research has led to discoveries, documents, records, and accounts that mirror the distant past and modern history of a country in which ethnic Chinese have, on many occasions, been on the receiving end of violence and discriminatory policies.

Historians trace the origins of this affliction to the early period of Dutch colonial rule in the seventeenth century. Numerous bloodbaths in the 1700s pitted thousands of Chinese against one another and other communities within the region, in the context of the geo-economic politics of colonial powers tugging for territories in Southeast Asia. The Dutch returned to reconquer Indonesia in 1946 after the defeat of the Japanese, who surrendered their domination of the country as a result of their defeat in World War II.

Only a few historians have written about the Chinese massacres of 1947-1949, citing them as the recurring of an old narrative at play: an independent, financially successful Chinese community (which, for the better part of their centuries-old existence in the region, either lived in forced or self-imposed isolation from other ethnic and religious groups) caught in the net of an old colonial game at the height of the country's independence-nationalistic fervor. While some ethnic Chinese gave into pressure and co-operated with the Dutch as military police, stand-by troops, and spies in various regions at this time, Dutch officials spread false statements that all Chinese communities were supporters of the Dutch. This gave the Indonesian forces (official and para-military groups, newly-freed prisoners, as well as psychopathic bandits) fighting against the Dutch justification to unleash yet another horrendous cycle of murder, rape, and destruction on the Chinese communities, while rehashing anti-Chinese sentiments in the public sphere.

Cycles of violence in history occur because collective memory is easily triggered to react when age-old communal conflicts, grudges, violence, and traumas are repressed by fear and shame and left unprocessed by the generation that lived through them and by those who come after. History is therefore a central ingredient in Harsono's forty-year artistic trajectory, traceable in a special documentation-installation in this exhibition, entitled *Harsono Timeline*.

Works in *The Chronicles of Resilience*, most of which were specifically developed for the exhibition, aim to fulfill much more than mere references to history. They are making and recording of history, simultaneously. An encapsulation of a particular people's experience in a particular place and time, told in ways that create transparent, personal, and emotional spaces for viewers to stand very much apart from negative identity-politics, and instead very close to universal humanity.

The works embody Harsono's socio-philosophical lens, which views the life of an individual as intrinsically linked to collective history. The transformation of collective trauma begins with individuals who are willing to confront and process collective memories in their respective societies. Masses do not transform, people do. Therefore, as an artist, Harsono is fulfilling his responsibility to his collective, but also humanity at large. Aesthetics are instrumental for Harsono, who, as a true activist and humanitarian at heart, literally gives form to what has been kept very abstract before, and what could become abstract in the future.

The ongoing online project *Digital Souls*, for example, is a curation of the actual physical locations of some of the mass gravesites, which he has photographed in detail and uploaded onto Google Maps – ensuring that viewers can virtually travel to, and interact with, these sites at the click of a mouse in the gallery, while leaving traces of their existence for the future, when perhaps these gravesites might be physically demolished, as some gravesites he discovered a few years ago already have been.

An official document that Harsono uncovered during his research at the National Archives (Leiden University Library, Netherlands) is entitled *Memorandum of Inhumane Acts* and subtitled: "Outlining Acts of Violence and Inhumanity Perpetrated by Indonesian Bands on Innocent Chinese Before and After the Dutch, Police Action Was Enforced on July 21, 1947." The entire content of this document is rendered as an installation of 33 individual prints, each replicating the original pages of the published document, onto which Harsono has made his drawings and markings.

Found and collected objects and other memorabilia are juxtaposed alongside miniature-scale 3D printed models of some of the mass-gravesites within the cabinetry of another major installation, *Memory of the Survivor*. The installation symbolizes the physical, spiritual, and emotional body of a woman survivor interviewed by Harsono in her home last year. Her image is projected onto a wheelchair amidst several competing sound recordings inside objects, which are triggered by viewers walking by.

Another seminal new work, *The Light of Spirit*, replicates a single marked gravesite made from earth and sand, over which a chandelier of over 200 electric candles dangles. Giving physical shapes and forms to the experiences of the survivors, their families, and community, Harsono is honoring a collective that has, for the most part, refused to be violent, angry, or vengeful, but rather patiently focused on persevering to succeed in bettering present and future conditions of its members' lives, and the lives of their offspring.

To Harsono, *Chronicles of Resilience* is not merely an exhibition but an official historical record, written in the form of artworks to symbolize the importance of engagement with painful events in history now, and in the future.

The works have been conceived to evoke deep emotional consciousness for viewers to contemplate their conceptions of responsibility, empathy, forgiveness, loss, love, trauma, and community. The exhibition in its essence is a performance expressing the artist's gratitude for a very particular, profound, and unbreakable quality in human nature, known by some as the spirit of resilience. The works are, in many respects, a celebration and memorialization of this great internal human condition: resiliency, which has allowed the people that Harsono has been interviewing, and others throughout the world, to transform their losses and dark experiences, to persevere beyond survival, and to nurture love and compassion for themselves and others. Such grave histories as the massacres of 1947-1949 do not have to be repeated if we acknowledge, confront, record, remember, and seek to understand their causes actively, every day, as individuals sharing this planet for a time.

Born and raised in Afghanistan, **Leeza Ahmady** is a New York-based independent curator noted for her foundational work concerning art practices in Central Asia. She directs the educational and curatorial platform Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), which partners with leading institutions in New York and Asia to present significant artists, curators, and practitioners in special exhibitions, performances, and forums in the United States. Ahmady has presented exhibitions and programs at numerous local and international venues including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Asia Society, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, dOCUMENTA (13), and Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art amongst many others.