

## ESSAY

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## THEATRE STATE

By Jompert Kuswidananto (Indonesia)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

14 Oct 2016 – 2 Jan 2017, Jendela (Visual Arts Space)

### Notice:

This essay was published in the programme booklet for *Theatre State* from 2016 to 2017. Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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***Theatre State*** is an exhibition by artist, Jompert Kuswidananto (Indonesia).

It was exhibited at the Jendela (Visual Arts Space) at Esplanade, from 14 Oct 2016 – 2 Jan 2017.

***Theatre State*** traces how the theatre, both as a metaphorical place and as an allegorical medium, has been a site of ongoing political friction in Indonesia. During the New Order regime (1966–1998), the state went beyond the categorical staging of “national” or “state theatre” as part of its governmentality, and operated, intervened in, reclaimed, took over or shut down performance in various “public” and “empty” spaces to produce a kind of immersive *theatre state* at large. Following the demise of the regime, new political subjects emerged on every level of the political hierarchy, and the fight for the theatre stage has expanded and gone through many permutations since – both vertically (between those who hold power and the governed subjects), as well as horizontally (friction among and between citizens).

The project is an attempt to trace this fight for the stage, especially through the intervention-performances of reclaiming the stage and the visual shutting down of performances, such as through the veiling and burning of objects in public places. Kuswidananto continues to pay a deep interest in how objects frame, define, structure and eventually archive corporeal stories and social events that have been performed, and then have slipped out of space and time. In this project in particular, Kuswidananto and his collaborator, the Indonesian contemporary theatre collective Teater Garasi, focus on subject-object constellations that framed the friction for the stage to eventually pose questions of spectatorship: who is watching the fight, how does one watch the fight, and in what way should the fight be seen?

The exhibition articulates the concept by first constructing the corporeal space of encounters between the spectacle and the spectators. Cheap steel chairs, which are commonly used at temporary performance spaces in Indonesia, are both the main focal point as well as the main frame of corporeality and temporality for the exhibition. Cross-referenced constellations of images lurk everywhere in the space, from the *Phantom's* fallen chandelier to traces of everyday objects scattered in the site. The audience's place – the house, in theatre terms – is a house also in a literal sense: a place where identities are being experimented with and are interchangeable, hung on the wall as living room ornaments and ready to be used when we exit the house and go into the world.

Theatrical conventions are also used as the technology of engagement, and they leave traces in the exhibition: when, how and in what way spectators should interact, clapping our hands, paying attention. At the same time, the audience also has recourse to tactics of resistance or disagreement: when, how and in what way we could resist the spectacle, disinterested, full of disbelief, or simply bored.

The exhibition then traces the temporality of the Theatre State spectacle through montages of re-enactment. Rather than constructing the work through chronological time, the exhibition builds a montage from piles of images through corporeal and bodily re-enactments, and traces how time is being unfolded, revealed, crosses borders and is circulated. One re-enacted image of a boxer defending his title, and being beaten up in the process, circulates and is perpetuated in various social scenarios: the boxer becomes a citizen in a mass demonstration against the New Order, and also becomes a restaurant owner whose business was ransacked by a paramilitary group during Ramadan. Through the uncanny images of self-erased tattoos as well as the communal cutting of hair, bodies appear more and more not only as subjects that generate images on the theatre stage, but also as another concentrated space of staging – that is, the body as theatre state. The circulation of these permutable embodied images reject the notion of chronological progression and therefore avoid the notion of repetition. Freed from the linearity of time, the work builds its own historicity. In one time, the image could be a tool of the oppressed; in another time, it can be a tool of the oppressor. These bodily and embodied images grow and circulate as radical matter poking holes in linearity, hijacking all sense of cohesive temporality and questioning our notion of corporeality. One image could become an allegory that infiltrates various points in time and space, and as we attempt to see history in a full picture, we end up with a composite picture of borrowed images, a picture that asks to go elsewhere, an image-theatre in tableau form that resists continuity as much as it resists finite completeness. Here, the tableau serves not as a captured body and time in frame, but as splices of motion being stalled and slowed down against the regulating impulse of linearity.

In another part of the exhibition space, the spectacle itself is screened. The war scene comes from a popular re-enactment of an episode from the Indonesian revolutionary war at the end of 1940s, based on a war hero myth glorifying Suharto, the late Indonesian leader. The re-

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enactment of war is amateurish and touristy, a paradox of spectatorship at its best, mixing anxiety with historical experience as much as it perpetuates historical fallacy. As one screen captures the faces of the audience, new questions intervene in the room, asking who is watching and how one watches the fight. By reconsidering history through images and images that haunt history, *Theatre State* – in the hands of Kuswidananto and Teater Garasi – becomes an open invitation to relocate history as spectacle and historiography as spect-actor. The result is finite but it refuses to stay still.