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Othak-Athik Gathik, Othak-Athuk Gathuk (Finely Connecting, Adjusting, Modifying, Refining, Tweaking): The Road to Creativity

Abstract:

This article is intended to expose the traditional Javanese phrase that reads “Othak athik gathik, othak athuk gathuk” (linking or uniting things that were previously unconnected), in relation to creating new metaphors for art, which I use to think on and do art. The essence of art is creativity, while metaphors are the essence of the language of art. When a new metaphor is created essentially we go through a process: linking things that were not connected, to unify them, trying out and tinkering with different things so that they fit (are cohesive and work well); and refining or modifying things to find solutions. However, these sorts of creative processes have never been recognized and have been disregarded and even considered irrelevant. Othak athik gathik, othak athuk gathuk, has essentially never been discussed in the academic world. This process is misunderstood as activities with no clear footing that are considered unscientific by art academics, who nowadays tend to be overly reductionist and linear. At least, this is a growing trend in the academic world of art (where I teach), which has become increasingly formalistic.

Keywords: Othak-athik gathik, creativity



A Way To Gain Insight

It is the reality mentioned above that made me interested in raising 'othak athik gathik, othak athuk gathuk' as a subject in this article. From observing the creative methods of numerous artists, ranging from completely unknown artists to those who have established themselves and gained significant reputations, I can conclude that this creative process of connecting different things to become something new is indeed frequently put into practice. It is through this way that one gains insight from a process of observing in great depth, or is able to see the similarities of things that appear to be different, or seek out the differences of things that seem to be similar.

In order to clarify the structure and significant meaning attached to othak-athik gathik, othak athuk gathuk, I have used the creative works of Eddy Sulistyono and Nanang R. Hidayat for exposure and analysis as examples. These two artists are truly just a tiny sample of numerous creative people who combine two (or more) different things in their works that are taken from different contexts, then combined and tampered with to become something new.

Othak-athik gathik, othak athuk gathuk is a great way to understand the reality that exists around us, and is also a tool for creating metaphors to represent the reality we choose to expose. It is through this internalization that I produce sketches, and the subject matter of the sketches that I will present in the 12th International Visual Arts Workshop and Exhibition in Thailand in 2017 derive from two different environments - Indonesia and Thailand - that are jointly presented in one frame to deliver a new metaphor.

Of Frequently Misunderstood Contexts

"Othak-athik gathik, othak-athuk gathuk" is often used by dhalang (puppet masters) in shadow puppet shows. Dhalang frequently associate the sounds/meanings of words with other words to create funny, satirical or critical phrases when audiences often underrate or regard their work as just fabricated ideas or even consider it as a product of mystical/charlatany thinking. The Javanese, who are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia, have a tradition of frequently linking up words that have similar sounds, using the sounds from either the beginning or end of the words to then mean something. Othak-athik gathik is often used to infer something or to perform an action and frequently used as the basis for assessing or even predicting things. For example, in a traditional wedding ceremony, kluwih (artocarpus camansi) leaves are laid on the floor and several young coconuts (called cengkir in Javanese) are displayed as part of the wedding decoration and simultaneously as one of the traditional components for making offerings. The artocarpus camansi leaves on the floor are deliberately intended to be trodden on by the wedding couple. The sound of 'kluwih' (name of the artocarpus camansi tree) is associated with the Javanese word 'luwih', which means "more". So, 'stepping on the artocarpus camansi leaves' is regarded as a symbolic act that signifies hope that the newly married couple's life will bring 'more' fortune and prosperity.

The young coconuts or cengkir are also interpreted symbolically. The word 'cengkir' is made up of the syllables 'ceng' and "kir". Ceng is interpreted as 'ngencengke' (to strengthen), and "kir" is translated as mind or 'thought'. Combining these two syllables to become 'cengkir' meaning 'strengthening thought', which can be defined as 'consolidating intention'.

Intellectual work or engineered imagination link two different things that not really related that are then integrated to become something new, which in fact is exactly the same with intellectual acts when we create metaphors.

A metaphor is a direct non-literal comparison made between two dissimilar objects, actions, or traits (from creativewritingguild.com). A metaphor is a figure of speech, which makes an implicit, implied or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics or a resemblance of two contradictory or different objects that is made based on a single or some common characteristics (from literacydevices.net)

It is indeed true that metaphors are often used to say one thing while intending another, making implicit comparisons between things linked by a common feature, perhaps even violating semantic rules (Robert R. Hoffman, 1990). Nevertheless, a metaphor is an important way of communicating as told by George Lakoff (2003) in that metaphors are not simply literacy devices, but something active in understanding, perhaps even the very basis of language. In terms of the use of metaphors in language, Lakoff goes on to say that metaphors organize our experiences, uniquely express that experience, and create convincing realities (Metaphors We Live By, London: University of Chicago Press). Lakoff's opinion affirms Davidson's assertion (1991: 246) that states that metaphors are a valid tool not only in literature but also in science, philosophy, and law. Metaphors are effective in praise and abuse, prayers and promotions, description and prescription.¹ The role of metaphors is not just to beautify the expression of language but rather as an important human attempt to open up imaginary spaces in renewing ways of looking at the world and also to see the multitude of possibilities in addressing reality. Thus, metaphoric language is actually a human survival mechanism and moving in responding to changing and moving realities and for addressing a world that continues to change in a process of being itself (from Bambang Sugiharto, 1996: 106). So, it is no exaggeration to say that metaphors have the power to reshape our perception and reorganize it anew (Sugiharto, 1996: 106).

It is a fact that many people, particularly in Java, often tinker with the meanings of words or word fragments and then link them in creative or playful ways. It can be concluded that the significant meanings and value that arise from this kind of thinking and in the creation of new expressions through othak-athik gathik, and othak-athuk gathuk need to be appreciated. Moreover, this kind of thought is widely applied and put into practice by many creative people, including visual artists, who have produced many important and meaningful works. Let's take a look at the following illustrations

¹ Donald Davidson (1991), *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

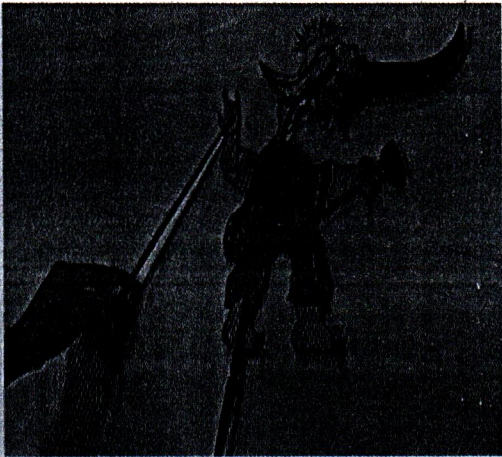
Eddy Sulistyono, *Kapan Hamil Den? (When Were You Pregnant Sir?)*, 2007, Mixed media: Carcoal, pencil, chinese ink, acrylic, oil painting on canvas, 200 x 200 cm².



This painting presents four human figures in an irregular room with a checkered floor, which gives the appearance of a more poky room. The main figure who is sitting in a chair is a person with the face of Raden Saleh, a famous painter born in Central Java who was educated in the Netherlands by the Dutch East Indies government in the first half of the 19th century. He lived in Europe for about 20 years before returning to Java and living in Jakarta until his death long before the Republic of Indonesia proclaimed independence on 17 August, 1945.

Raden Saleh is depicted with a pregnant woman's body. The shape of her breasts is clearly visible through her long-sleeved shirt. She is wearing a long batik sarong in accordance to tradition that was developing in and around the Javanese court palace. There is a tiny baby in her lap who appears to have been born prematurely. This baby is a metaphoric expression painted by Eddy Sulistyono to illustrate the world of painting that was cultivated and supported by Raden Saleh. Unfortunately, Raden Saleh lived and produced works long before Indonesia's independence in a time that was constantly imbued with discussions and debates on Dutch colonialism. Through this painting, Eddy Sulistyono presents his opinion of the position of Raden Saleh in the history of art in Indonesia and in world art history, that is, Raden Saleh has never been fully recognized as part of Indonesian art history, whereas the role, existence and contribution of his art in the world of art has been unquestionably acknowledged.

The following work is presented to see how the principle of othak-athik gathik is applied in a work of Nanang R. Hidayat, titled *Wayang Sulawesi (Sulawesi Shadow Puppet)*.



This is one of a series of shadow puppets works, where each puppet is shaped in the form of the larger islands within the archipelago called the Republic of Indonesia. These island shadow puppets were made to represent the cultures existing in communities consisting of a multitude of races and ethnic groups with different languages, customs, and beliefs. Wayang Sulawesi, which is featured below is a shadow puppet whose form is taken from the global shape of Sulawesi Island as viewed from an atlas. In creating this puppet, Nanang R. Hidayat links ideas that are drawn from traditional/conventional shadow puppets with story lines taken from the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics and its shape resembling Sulawesi Island represents the lives of various communities from a number of provinces on the island. Nanang sees that the shape and geographical conditions of Sulawesi Island, as other main islands in Indonesia, have greatly influenced the character development of the communities living there that comprise of an array of unique and distinct cultures spread across the different regions and provinces. This work proves just how important the awareness that everything is interconnected and mutually influential is, thus, awareness of othak-athik gathik is a tremendous awareness to apply in order to generate creative ideas for a variety of purposes.

My Plan

I apply the awareness that everything is interconnected in processing art, in the sense that we can use any media, technique, or expression, as long as it is relevant to what is wanting to be conveyed through an artwork and in accordance to situational time and space. I believe that whatever we are doing with intensity and in a continuous manner wherever we are will undoubtedly become a rhythm, vibration, or frequency that eventually causes resonance. This awareness has made me truly appreciate collaboration, communication, and cooperation.

I will bring sketches that I made at the Gayatri Museum in Tulungagung in East Java, where I encountered many statues that had decapitated heads, a missing nose, or were broken. At that time, I was very sad and concerned to see those damaged statues, which were obviously not damaged by nature, but disfigured deliberately and collectively, like the iconoclasm that occurred in the 14th until the 15th century in Europe, and that also continues right now in many places in the world. I will align these sketches with other sketches that I made in Bangkok in Thailand, with the intention of applying othak-athik gathik, othak-athuk gathuk, which I see as a way of thinking and an art practice that is relevant to the reality of nature, that is, everything is constantly changing and in a process of becoming, interconnecting and is mutually influential.

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