

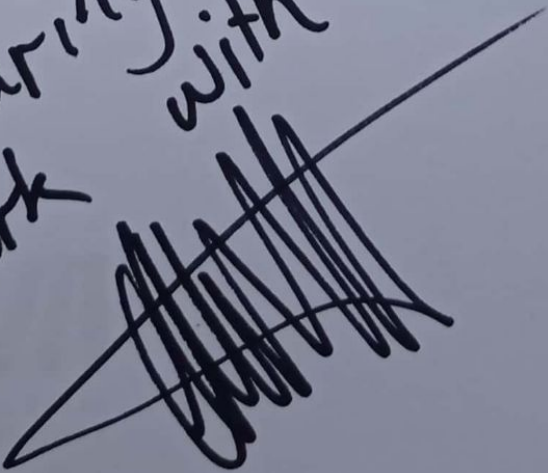


ARTISTS
and
the **PEOPLE**
Ideologies of Art
in Indonesia

Elly Kent

Artists and the People

Dear Sekelompok
thanks so much
for sharing your
work with me!



Personal/Social/Interactive: A Formula for the Engaged Artist

My paintings are like my exhaled breath. They are full of my personal spirit (2008).⁷²

Involving the arts and social community is inevitable, if there is a desire to make art that is meaningful for broader society (2012).⁷³

—I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana

The two statements quoted above by I Wayan Sujana (b.1967), better known as “Suklu”, are a tangible representation of the paradigms that this contemporary artist works with. Echoing Soedjojono’s *jiwa ketok*, Suklu refers to his paintings as an extension of his own spirit, maintaining a commitment to the process of making and to the artist’s hand. He regards the artist as the centre of individual expression, embedding personal meaning in his art objects. Yet the drive to carry the cathartic, expressive energy he experiences in the drawing process through to a broader audience compels him to open his practices up to the involvement of others.

Suklu has constructed a personal formula around the scope of his practice, which provides a useful language and structure with which to analyse his work. This “personal-interactive-social” structure, which Suklu uses to break his practice into three areas with different levels of participation, is an example of how Indonesian artists are consciously formulating new conceptual frameworks around their practices. Although Suklu clearly delineates of these “personal-interactive-social” practices, all three are in fact mutually informative and aesthetically linked.

The first practice produces what Suklu terms “personal” works: individual expressive artwork using painting, drawing or sculptural techniques that tend towards abstraction. The painting *Musim Bergeser* (Shifting seasons) from 2012, shows how Suklu’s abstract expressionist approach is linked equally to his studies in formalist modern (Western) art theory and his training under modernist Balinese painters.

⁷² Wang Zineng, *Elok Berkelok* (Singapore: The Aryaseni Gallery, 2008), 10.

⁷³ Suklu, in an interview with Sukarelawanto in Sumarta, Wayan “Jengki”, Wayan Suklu and Ema Sukarelawanto, *The Unseen Things* (Ubud: Komaneka Fine Art Gallery, 2012), 49.

The second practice Suklu identifies is “interactive”, in which audiences or other artists are invited to engage directly with bamboo constructions that he has designed specifically for that purpose. These large installations become “third spaces” when activated by the practice of dancers, musicians or other performers, a hybrid artwork evolving out of the creativity of two artists. The *Cenderawasih* (Paradise) installation from 2010 is one example of this interactive space, but Suklu’s open studio and performance space, BatuBelah Art Space, also manifests this conception of “interactive” practice.

The last practice in Suklu’s formulation is “social” practice, in which he surrenders aesthetic decisions and practical implementation to participants. The most well-known of these works is Suklu’s ongoing *Drawing on Novels* project, which also serves to demonstrate the links between this “social” practice and his “personal” works.

Suklu’s trivalent practice is influenced strongly by his readings in theory and philosophy studies, including Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT) and the specific modernist tendencies that have evolved from the philosophies of traditional Balinese painting. Suklu’s personal-interactive-social construction provides his art practice with a frame that echoes the entanglement of Yuliman’s deconstruction of “two arts”. He does this by invoking both “ends” of the knot through his personal (autonomous) artworks and his social (heteronomous) projects, which are then tied together through interactive installations, spaces and events. Further, Suklu’s self-declared influences combine exogenous and endogenous theories and practices, which he has consolidated into a conceptual framework to support his tripartite approach. Like other artists, his practice has grown in the conducive “climate” set in the earliest conceptions of Indonesian modernism.

On the day I met Suklu, I first wandered through the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA) in Ubud, visiting rooms filled with paintings from what has become known as the Balinese “classic” style of painting. These are characteristically idealised: figurative scenes of pre-modern agrarian life or from folk tales and the Hindu epics. They are executed in stylised, flat and decorative compositions, generally with muted colours thick with ornamentation. The contemporary section of ARMA featured installations by artists such as Nyoman Erawan, whose enormous phallic *Lingga Yoni* soft sculptures soared up to the high ceilings. In the courtyard the remains of Erawan’s performance at the opening

of the Bali ACT festival had left the otherwise tropical idyll looking like an act of violence had occurred. Only slightly familiar with Suklu’s work, I wondered at the time where his work would fall among these distinct visual languages that have emerged on the island.

Being a Balinese artist, Suklu’s practice is unavoidably located in relation to a specific art historical context that differs somewhat from Java and other parts of Indonesia. Balinese painting has a long pre-modernist history associated with religious practice. In part influenced by this historical tradition and in part due to Bali’s unique engagement with European artists and American anthropologists, as well as other travellers, Balinese modernist painting in the early 20th century developed in ways entirely distinct from those in Java.

Suklu’s paintings cannot be completely separated from this divergent modernist tradition—although they may not be immediately identifiable as a part of it. This is largely because of the influence of the training received from one of the original modernist painters. In his early twenties, from 1987, Suklu spent three years living and studying near Pengosekan, known as an artists’ village. There Suklu lived with the painter Ketut Liyer (1922–2016), who was a member of the Balinese painters’ association the Pita Maha Arts Society, founded by Cokorda Agung Sukawati, Walter Spies and Rudolph Bonnet in 1936.

Ketut Liyer’s influence on the young Suklu was strong, according to writer and poet Wayan “Jengki” Sunarta:

It was Ketut Liyer who opened Suklu to the concept that every painting, both traditional and modern, had its own character in compositional relationships.... The aspect that impressed him most from exploring traditional art was the act of meditation through the drawing of lines, *nyeket* [sketching], *nyigar* [shading], *mangsi* [black lines], colouring.⁷⁴

It is this attention to process, line and tone rather than subject matter that remains influential on Suklu’s work. Yet, in spite of his attraction to the classical processes that he studied under Ketut, Suklu did not

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41. For a more detailed explanation of these terms, see Tang Adimawan, “Sepintas Perkembangan Sejarah Seni Lukis Bali dari Masa Kerajaan Hingga Neo Pitamaha”, *Pitamaha* 2014, <http://neopitamaha.blogspot.com.au/>.

uncritically accept the characteristic style of the area. At the time of Suklu's residence there, Pengosekan painters in general were also known for painting stylised flora and fauna, a trend which the young Suklu strongly resisted.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the process of line drawing and intense focus, particularly as generated through repetition, had a strong impact on Suklu's subsequent works.

In his individual practice, Suklu focuses strongly on repetition of line and colour to generate a meditative state. He credits a single transformative experience at a lecture he attended after his graduation from art college for awakening in him a consciousness of the potential of meditation in everyday acts. Suklu attended a public forum addressing the lifework of poet-priest Ida Made Pedanda Sidemen, one of Bali's most celebrated literary figures.⁷⁶ Suklu says "From that discussion I was convinced that artistic processes are a form of meditation in everyday life. The process is most important, not the end result."⁷⁷

Using repetition of line and colour allows Suklu to immerse himself in the process and, simultaneously, in meditation. This is evident in Suklu's sculptural works, often assembled from collections of found objects (coconut husks, seashells) or reliant on repetitious craft practices such as weaving bamboo. It is also evident in his paintings, many of which are constructed from thousands of small curved lines grouped or separated to build up tone and dimension.

While some have proposed that these small curved lines are merely compositional devices, seeing Suklu's use of meditation in painting as "without profound or fanciful theory", this oversimplifies his practice.⁷⁸ On the contrary, in my conversations with Suklu he indicated that his

⁷⁵ Sunarta, Suklu, and Sukarelawanto, *The Unseen Things*, 41.

⁷⁶ In 2011, the Ubud Writer's Festival was dedicated to Sidemen's work, and he is a regular subject of seminars and panel discussion throughout the island. Sidemen was renowned for his philosophical poetry, architectural works and simple poetry. He was reported to be 126 years old when he died in 1984, his life having spanned the history of Bali's modernisation from feudalist kingdoms through colonisation and into the Republic of Indonesia. I Made Sujaya, "Ida Pedanda Made Sidemen, Pengarang Besar Bali yang Menyiapkan Sendiri 'Jalan Pulang'", *Balisaja.com: Portal Bali yang Benar-Benar Bali*, 2013, <http://www.balisaja.com/2013/09/ida-pedanda-made-sidemen-pengarang.html>.

⁷⁷ Suklu, quoted in Sunarta, Suklu, and Sukarelawanto, *The Unseen Things*, 41.

⁷⁸ Zineng, *Elok Berkelok* (Lovely curves), 10.

use of meditation and repetition are intimately bound to both Balinese-Hindu cultural practice and the principles of modernist art, from which Suklu has developed an approach that can be read through Kobena Mercer's notion of "discrepant abstraction". Mercer contends that discrepant abstraction "includes almost everything that does not neatly fit into the institutional narrative of abstract art as a monolithic quest for artistic 'purity'".⁷⁹ The purity Mercer refers to here is that frequently challenged principle of modernist abstraction, that art should be, indeed must be, "for art's sake", and thus free from the taint of politics, culture, community or context. For Suklu, and we might argue for any artist, purity is an impossibility.

Mercer's book brings together a collection of essays that demonstrate how abstract traditions from outside of the United States and Europe can contribute to a broader discourse on "discrepant abstractions". While Indonesia is not addressed in the book, Suklu's conscious attempts to incorporate heteronomous religio-spiritual experiences with formalist modernist tenets demonstrate just one aspect where practices in Indonesia offer important contributions to broader art theory discourses.

After absorbing Pedanda Sidemen's philosophy of repetition as meditation, Suklu spent 13 years searching for a framework within which to realise his conviction that there was creative merit in these practices. In an interview he stated:

Eventually after I went to ISI and I really studied the theory and practice of modern art, only then could I do it. So, for the repetition of line and colour, I take this from formalism in visual art, line, colour, texture. Only later did I have an understanding of how to share it with the public.... The technique is from modern art, but I associate it with traditional text... not narrative, but traditional concepts like a repetitious mantra, or the sound of a bell.⁸⁰

It is clear that Suklu takes a highly conceptual approach to the various exogenous and endogenous influences on his practice. The marriage of formalism and metaphysics informs all aspects of his creative work.

⁷⁹ Kobena Mercer et al., *Discrepant Abstraction* (London: MIT Press and InIVA, 2006).

⁸⁰ I Wayan Suklu Sujana, interview with the author, Elly Kent, Klungkung, 18 October 2013. ISI Denpasar is the Indonesian Institute of Art campus in Bali's capital city, Denpasar.



Figure 8: I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana, *Musim Bergeser* (Shifting seasons), 2012, ink and acrylic on un-primed canvas, 120 × 200 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

In the painting *Musim Bergeser* (Shifting seasons, 2012), two surfaces interact to suggest this duality of purpose. The large unprimed canvas field has been filled with dynamic, flowing lines of black ink, seemingly randomly applied with a free and urgent hand. At times the lines draw together to suggest a form, an object, but as we focus our eyes, we realise they are no more than suggestions. Some leap forward, thicker lines and shading propelling them into a middle ground; perhaps we can see an ear or a ring just left of centre, or maybe the phallic protrusion to its right suggests a *lingga-yoni* formation?

Other perspectival shapes emerge, suggesting depth of field, but are then flattened by the apparently random intersection of curving lines that play across the surface. Unlike the small, carefully curved lines that make up the background of many of Suklu’s paintings, these are more like traces of the hand as it moves from one abstract form to another, a cursive conjunction. The line work in *Musim Bergeser* unfolds in the manner of gestural abstraction, invoking Willem de Kooning’s black and white abstractions of the late 1950s, where the figure is neither absent nor overtly present.

Over the top of this field of floating lines and shapes intrude tapering strips of white, strident and carefully executed, moving down

from the centre left at the top of the canvas and emanating from a central source like the petals of a spider orchid or ylang-ylang flower. On each petal, dimension and depth are inscribed through tone built up from hundreds of tiny lines. Where the petals fall across the gestural marks on the base layer, those marks show through, reasserting their presence. This ghostly white, flowery form, at once foreboding and beautiful, evokes the monochromatic paintings produced by many classical Balinese painters, particularly those collected by anthropologists Bateson and Mead in their search for the “Balinese character” among the painters of Batuan village in the 1930s.

This composition is full of contradictions: a monochromatic approach is maintained but is also undermined by the natural tones of the canvas. White tendrils contrast with the raw canvas background; the naturalistic form of the white flower has been controlled and stylised while the abstract gestures seem to refer to natural movement. Rather than a result of an “east-west” fusion, Suklu’s work explores key a priori elements of both Balinese and Western modernist traditions, drawing overlapping elements from each. Both traditions equally inform his process-oriented aesthetic, his use of line, movement and texture to build up a field of contrast, and his adoption of meditation as methodology.

Yuliman contended that the “climate” for the emergence of abstraction in Indonesian painting was set by a continuous artistic ideology that allowed “visual elements” to “evoke, declare or convey valuable emotions, feelings or artistic experiences”, even when they are representational.⁸¹ This is echoed in Mercer’s description of the “third perspective”, in which he claims:

abstraction merely refers to a range of artistic procedures whose outcome is to lay bare the basic signifying elements of form, line and colour, on which all art is based as a medium of visual communication.⁸²

Comparing Yuliman and Mercer’s approaches shows how the modernist idea of abstract expressionism as a rupturing exercise in “purity”—in

⁸¹ Sanento Yuliman, “Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, 1976).” In *Dua Seni Rupa: Sepilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman*, ed. Asikin Hasan (Jakarta: Yayasan Kalam, 2001), 93.

⁸² Mercer et al., *Discrepant Abstraction*, 19. Mercer is referring to Mel Gooding’s position in M. Gooding, *Abstract Art* (Tate Publishing, 2001), 6–7.

which each medium is seen as self-defining and independent—is undermined by the diversity of practices that exist in the field.⁸³ Practices like Suklu's—and their engagement with spirituality, historical precedents and social contexts—demonstrate the fallacy of abstraction's immunity to the infinite variety of heteronomous influences artists are exposed to.

Rancière contends that artwork functions as a “third term”, inherently and inevitably mediating between the artist and the viewer so that the only truly independent aspect of an artwork's existence—in this case, an abstract expressionist painting—is the viewer's experience.⁸⁴ Prior to the viewer's experience, the artist's conception and the artwork's physical form are always heteronomously informed by each other and the context of their existence: the artists material choices (and availability of materials), their social environment, educational exposure, theoretical understandings, and cultural values. Even when artists like Suklu draw on their “personal spirit” in the process of abstract painting, they are often doing so in conscious evocation of similar processes used by their forebears in pursuit of less abstract images.

In Hill's analysis of Suklu's teacher and mentor Ketut Liyer's painting practice, he asserts that contrary to expectations the image in Liyer's seemingly stylised paintings emerges “from its composition (or form) and from the way it was made, rather than from its subject matter”.⁸⁵ The repetition of shape and the uniform gesture used to create shapes and composition in Ketut's classical paintings engender the same meditative immersion that Suklu expresses through abstraction. Art historian Jean Couteau notes that Suklu's work plays with pattern and shape to build form in the same way that classical Balinese painting does:

This “identity” is evident in the repetitive patterns of his geometric abstractions, which draw upon the salient feature of all Balinese art (be it music, dance or painting), as once noted by the anthropologist, Gregory Bateson: the repetition or semi-repetition of patterns,

⁸³ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” In *Esthetics Contemporary*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1978), 428–38.

⁸⁴ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum International* 45, no. 7 (2007): 278.

⁸⁵ Christopher Hill, *Survival and Change: Three Generations of Balinese Painters* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006), 106.

combined with one another in a melodious “musical” manner. In his paintings, what Suklu does is to capture this basic structure of Balinese aesthetics and then give it a contemporary “skin”.⁸⁶

While this reference to a skin may seem to point to an understanding of Suklu's works as only superficially contemporary, it is actually made in the context of a Balinese saying which reminds the peanut not to forget its skin: its origins. In this we can read Suklu's artworks as contemporary vessels, carrying tradition within them, yet firmly positioned as artwork emerging from an originary discourse.

In his personal space of art-making, Suklu is testing forms that reject neither tradition nor modernity but seek a meditative space for individual reflection on both these external pressures. In his social and interactive spaces, Suklu begins to push the boundaries of these individual reflections into defined, yet open, aesthetic arenas.

Like de Kooning, Suklu demonstrates a “churning self-immersion in different approaches to the physical process of making”.⁸⁷ Also like de Kooning, he seeks inspiration for his abstract contemplations from novels—but in an entirely different manner.⁸⁸ *Drawing on Novels* is an ongoing work that operates in both Suklu's “personal” and “social” spaces, and is grounded in the conviction not merely that the “unconscious is something”, but also that it is something that can be tapped into through visual manifestations.

The practice that Suklu uses in *Drawing on Novels* was initially a personal creative exercise to maintain fluid drawing skills, and as meditation; the work involves “unconscious” or “automatic” drawing with charcoal on the pages of novels. Through this practice, executed immediately on rising and throughout the day, Suklu meditates, allowing his hand to make marks without theme or subject. As he begins to draw, he notes how forms appear unbidden and he retains the thought for later or moves on to new shapes. The forms often resemble the line work in the painting *Musim Bergeser*. In our interview I asked how this process informed his other practices. Suklu replied:

⁸⁶ Jean Couteau, *Reading Objects* (Ubud, Bali: Gaya Fusion Art Space, 2008), 4–5.

⁸⁷ Rackstraw Downes, “De Kooning's Attitude”, *Art Journal* 48, no. 3 (1989): 241.

⁸⁸ For instance, De Kooning's painting *Light in August* (1947) was inspired by Faulkner's 1932 novel of the same name. David Clarke, “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-colonial Approach to ‘American’ Art.” In *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: MIT Press and InIVA, 2006), 44–5.

Sometimes other forms emerge, which suddenly cross over into something else, so [I think] “this could be an object”. That’s why I’ve come to need it, so every morning when I wake up in the morning I do this first.... In Bali, priests begin the day with a mantra; I use this as a visual mantra.⁸⁹

Suklu’s dedication to automatic drawing on novels as a method for bringing the unconscious to the surface prompted him to bring the work into his “social” space as a kind of expressive therapeutic tool for participants.

Drawing on his own sense of the cathartic nature of the process, and as an effective method for developing new forms (for instance, for bamboo sculptures or paintings), Suklu’s description of the methodology recalls meditative detachment. His written instructions to participants read as follows:

Take one novel. Feel the environment surround you. Open up the very first page on novel then open your mind, feeling, memory etc. Let your fingers touch the surface of the page. Then take the charcoal and [rather than] following your willing(ness) to capture something inside your mind and heart, instead open yourself to anything surrounding... it will be the stimulation to expressing those “things” into the form of visual language. See those pages as your recalling existence.⁹⁰

The instructions appear to echo those of Tristan Tzara’s instructions on how to make a Dadaist poem, published in the fifth of his *Seven Dada Manifestos*, 1916–20. That poem begins: “Take a newspaper”. By responding not to the content of the novel itself but to the surrounding environment, Suklu sees drawing on novels as a process that inscribes a secondary text onto the original narrative. The choice of fictional novels rather than reference books is deliberate; both the primary and secondary texts are constructed apart from reality.

The day after our initial interview I joined the Drawing on Novels workshop at a seminar for the Bali ACT festival, Art in Culture and

⁸⁹ Suklu Sujana, in conversation with the author, Elly Kent, Klungkung, 18 October 2013.

⁹⁰ I Wayan Suklu Sujana, “Tiga Metode Pendekatan Seni Pada Masyarakat”, 2013, Bentara Budaya, Denpasar, Bali. I have adjusted this text slightly to make it more legible.



Figure 9: *Drawing on Novels*, a participatory workshop conducted at Bentara Budaya, Denpasar, by I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana during Bali ACT, 2013.

Tradition (2013). Suklu’s formal presentation focused on his “social space”, where he identified three methods for approaching the community: “Repetition of Line and Colour”, “Drawing on Novels” and “Bamboo-Strong-and-Flexible”. After the presentation, during which he explained the theory behind each of these approaches, Suklu invited the audience to participate in “Drawing on Novels”.

The audience attending the seminar consisted largely of senior high school and university students, most of them aspiring artists.⁹¹ Suklu began by asking the entire audience to reconfigure the seating into a large circle and then collect novels provided by the organisers. With Suklu demonstrating whilst circulating and speaking to the group, the participants began to draw. He described the concept to participants as “something very personal” in which he saw expressive power and conceptual simplicity. It was for these reasons that he decided to shift his habit of drawing on novels from the personal space into the social

⁹¹ School students in Indonesia are often required to attend workshops, seminars and other public forums and can thus accumulate credit points towards their courses.

space, sharing it with his students at the Denpasar campus of the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI), with visitors to his BatuBelah Art Space, and in other forums. Hence, we can see *Drawing on Novels* as evidence of the flow between the discrete areas of practice—personal and social spaces—that Suklu has devised.

Even as he is enacting and demonstrating his personal-interactive-social spaces, Suklu is simultaneously departitioning them. In November 2013, the “secondary texts” inscribed onto novels by participants at Bali ACT and during previous iterations at BatuBelah Art Space were exhibited as an installation titled *2 Fiksi* (2 fictions) in the *Bandung Paper Art Show* at Museum Sri Baduga. The installation clearly demonstrated the porosity in the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious in Suklu’s work. Two books that featured prominently, by virtue of being arranged with covers closed and facing up, were *The Complete Novels of Kafka* and an Indonesian translation of Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, in which Suklu’s former mentor Ketut Liyer is a key figure in the narrator’s spiritual enlightenment. These two versions of existential doubt—one profoundly modernist and dark, the other populist self-help—indicate the conscious thought that Suklu inevitably invests in static, exhibition presentations of *Drawing on Novels*, when the work moves into the space of the “third term” between artist and audience.

According to Suklu, during his master’s degree his lecturers at ITB, Asmudjo Irianto and Tisna Sanjaya disagreed over whether Suklu’s individual practice in the *Drawing on Novels* project was too personal to be considered contemporary art. According to Suklu, Irianto felt the drawings should be “contextual with the text” of the novels. But Suklu’s preference for an unconscious, simultaneously meditative and formalist approach to making demonstrates how his practice moves beyond the constraints of contemporary art when the latter is defined only by its resistance to modern art. Irianto identifies this resistance to modern art discourse as a feature of contemporary art in Indonesia, but Suklu’s practice, and that of the other artists presented in this book, shows that contemporary artists continue to be informed by and responsive to modernist discourses, not merely resistant.⁹² In Suklu’s case,

⁹²Irianto outlines this resistance as among the many defining factors of contemporary art in “Konteks Tradisi dan Sosial-Politik Dalam Seni Rupa Kontemporer Yogyakarta Era ‘90an.” In *Outlet: Yogya Dalam Peta Seni Rupa Kontemporer Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2000), 73–106.

he consistently penetrates the apparent boundaries between traditional, classical, modernist and contemporary practices, encompassing all within his own explorations of individual and participatory art practice:

In many of my repetitive works, I always invite other people to be involved within them, to experience the process themselves. I don’t care what form the end result takes. The important thing is the process. And other people can also experience and feel the process that I am enacting. Indirectly I am actually inviting other people to also enact a meditative process within my artistic practice.⁹³

By attempting to bring the unconscious to the surface through automatic, autonomous drawing, by refuting the singular authority of the novel as narrative and by refusing his own role as a singular author of the secondary texts within his *2 Fiksi* installation, Suklu works to dissolve the boundaries between self and the other, autonomy and heteronomy, the individual and society. In doing so, Suklu is also engaging with another prominent concern of postmodernist and contemporary discourse, namely the role (or lack of role) of the author in determining the reader’s interpretation of the text. Suklu’s concerns with this seminal argument—first raised by French post-structuralist Roland Barthes and echoed in Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*—shows a continuing engagement with ideas that emerge from his context as an artist in the 21st century’s “global world”, as well as those specific to his own cultural milieu.⁹⁴ In his interactive works, Suklu continues this dissolution of singular authorship by creating works specifically designed to engage with other artistic disciplines.

In his interactive work, Suklu builds an intersection between the social and the personal, retaining control over the concept or design of

⁹³Sunarta, Suklu, and Sukarelawanto, *The Unseen Things* (Ubud: Komaneka Fine Art Gallery, 2012), 42.

⁹⁴Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author.” In *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–8; Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, *Artforum International* 45, no. 7 (2007): 270–81. See also Michel Foucault, “What is An Author?.” In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–38; Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

the work and yet incorporating the intervention of other artists, such as dancers, musicians or other visual artists, as an integral element. He says he makes the works as interesting as possible for other artists in order to attract them to the possibilities of performance within the work.⁹⁵ Suklu's interactive works therefore act as an invitational and generative spectacle.

One of the works designed to encourage interaction was built in Bandung, West Java, at the end of Suklu's post-graduate study at ITB. The large bamboo constructions were installed around the Centre Culturel Français de Bandung in an exhibition titled *Jejak* (Traces) in 2010. A newspaper article described the work in detail:

The 5-metre-high installation stands as tall as the building's roof. Several thin tendrils of bamboo that curve to the left above it could be seen as a tail, although it is unclear which part is the head and which is the body.... Whilst *Cenderawasih* [Paradise] is strong enough to climb to its peak, *Kursi-Meja* [Chair and table] is for two people to sit at... *Tempat Duduk Durga* [Durga's seat] has the same function.... In this work, Suklu interprets the opposing characteristics of the wayang figure Batari Durga. Her beauty and ire are channelled through the intersecting bamboo rising in the centre and curving at its ends.⁹⁶

Jejak represented Suklu's attempt to reconcile the different working methods he uses in Bali—where his work is intuitive and direct—and the expectations in Bandung where “the public is known to appreciate artwork that balances concept and beauty”.⁹⁷ Furthermore, these works are heavily laden with the aesthetic and conceptual nuances of the Hindu-Balinese society Suklu originates from.

Presenting *Jejak* in the context of Bandung, a city that has seen a rapid rise in the performance of Islamic identity in the public sphere—both by individuals and the state—further complicates the work's

⁹⁵ Suklu Sujana, in conversation with the author, Elly Kent, Klungkung, 18 October 2013.

⁹⁶ Anwar Siswadi, “Jejak Wayan Suklu di Bandung”, *Tempo*, 3 February 2010, c3. Batari Durga is the Balinese-Hindu mother goddess of creation, preservation and destruction.

⁹⁷ Suklu, quoted in Siswadi, “Jejak Wayan Suklu di Bandung”.



Figure 10: Documentation of a performance at the opening night of the *Jejak* (Traces) exhibition, 2010 during which Balinese dancer I Nyoman Sura interacted with I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana’s bamboo installation *Cenderawasih*, in Bandung. Photo by Frans Ari Prasetyo, courtesy of the photographer.

context.⁹⁸ While the title is in reference to Suklu's intention to leave behind a trace of his time living in Bandung, it is also possible to read the works as references to the traces of the Hindu civilisations that in Sundanese (West Javanese) culture. The ongoing yet largely unspoken link between these past civilisations—described in 1946 by Soedjojono as “dead civilisations”—and contemporary interpretations of Islam in Sunda is also raised through works by Tisna Sanjaya.

Jejak opened with interactive performances. Two youth, clad in traditional Sundanese black tunics and slacks with batik head scarves,

⁹⁸ These shifts in religious practice and state attitudes in Bandung are detailed in Agus Ahmad Safei and Julian Millie, “Religious Bandung II: The Champion Arrives”, *Inside Indonesia*, no. 124 (2016), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/religious-bandung-ii-the-champion-arrives>.

moved slowly through the bamboo structure, tapping on each element to raise a different tone. This was followed by dancers Lena Guslina (b.1977) and I Nyoman Sura (1976–2013) performing Sura's choreography depicting a human couple who are givers of light and life. Like Tisna at the *reak* performance, Suklu reportedly spent the performance drawing the dancers on small canvasses.⁹⁹ In his review, urban ethnographer Frans Ari Prasetyo was moved to include descriptions of the soft rain and the smell of the kerosene torches during the opening. He described the atmosphere of performance as "near yet far, mysterious but real, contrasting but harmonised, inspiring in the midst of a lack of traditional consciousness, which is continually eroded by the hegemony of propriety".¹⁰⁰ The conceptual framework behind Suklu's interactive works result in complex experiences, drawing the viewer in with interplay of texture, line, repetition and movement but also opening their senses to the environment around them.

The large-scale bamboo work of *Cenderawasih* formed an imposing geometrical entrance to the building behind it. Inside the courtyard, *Tempat Duduk Durga's* soaring bamboo trunks with tapering ends fell away randomly, contrasting with the neat, solid structure at the base. The dance performances and music, and the audience's interactions with the bamboo works are, however, what justifies their existence beyond purely formalist concerns. This is where the hierarchies of artistic disciplines—such as visual and performance art, craft and fine art, functional and aesthetic—are dissolved. This occurs alongside the deconstruction of divisions between influences from traditional and modern art practices from Bali and elsewhere.

This installation, and Sura's choreography, were in fact in their second iteration, having earlier been installed and performed at the 2009 *Apa Ini, Apa Itu?* "happening art festival" in Suklu's hometown of Klungkung in Bali.¹⁰¹ In 2011, this site became the location for Suklu's own open access art space, BatuBelah Art Space, which might

⁹⁹ Siswadi, "Jejak Wayan Suklu di Bandung".

¹⁰⁰ Frans Prasetyo, "Suklu Di CCF Bandung." In *Play with Frankazoid*, ed. Frans Prasetyo, 2010. <http://fransariprasetyo.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/jejak-exhibition-di-ccf-bandung.html>.

¹⁰¹ *Apa Ini? Apa Itu?* (What is this? What is that?), 2009, headed by Suklu in collaboration with Djagad Art Space. <https://batubelahartspace.wordpress.com/2011/12/27/the-artifacts-of-apa-ini-apa-itu-what-is-this-what-is-that/>.

initially seem to indicate the kind of shift in mode that Miwon Kwon identified where artists move projects from temporary sited communities to ongoing ones.¹⁰² As interactive works, the large bamboo constructions lend themselves more to ritual or celebratory activities such as festivals, but a visit to BatuBelah revealed a more prosaic manifestation of the interactive space.

While Suklu categorises his physical art space at BatuBelah as part of his social practice, during my field research it became clear that it also acts as a formalised extension of his personal space into his interactive space. Located next to his family's compound on the coastal edge of Klungkung, where the town bleeds into rice fields, the space includes an open-air studio for workshops and classes, a lawn and garden leading down to a fishpond, and Suklu's own studio, library and storage space. Across the pond and garden, bamboo platforms remain in situ after initially being constructed as part of an interactive performative artwork, similar to the one that took place in Bandung.

When I visited in December 2013, installations from an earlier interactive project were still standing. One work created by a participating student was constructed from green bottles painted white and then etched to reveal the drawing as glinting green glass; another consisted of rolls of what appeared to be mattress innersprings. The latter had been the site of a performance in which students from ISI Denpasar had crawled through the wire tunnel, painting ink onto a long stretch of fabric tangled within Suklu's construction. Some of the students had returned on the day of my visit and were continuing to interact with the space and Suklu's family (and mine). They rearranged installations, drew with ink on paper, rehearsed a rock band and caught and barbecued fish from the pond.

Suklu has been strongly influenced by the work of Tisna Sanjaya, who was one of his lecturers during his studies at ITB. Tisna himself was inspired by Beuys' exhortation of the "social organism as a work of art" to set up a community art space in Bandung in 2008–09, a precursor to BatuBelah, which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter.¹⁰³ Yet BatuBelah is not, as such, a community art space.

¹⁰² Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 126–35.

¹⁰³ Joseph Beuys, "I Am Searching for a Field Character" (first published 1973), reprinted in *Participation*, ed. C. Bishop, *Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2006), 125.



Figure 11: A collaborative installation created by I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana and his students on the grounds of Suklu’s BatuBelah space in Klungkung, Bali (2013).

Rather, Suklu characterises it as a social space within his art practice. In this sense, it is unlike any of the communities as “sites” of art described by Miwon Kwon, because its unifying element is related neither to a mythic defining character nor to its specific site.¹⁰⁴

Instead, the site revolves around Suklu’s individual personality as a charismatic artist with an attendant social responsibility: BatuBelah is a social organism in a singular sense, a site for social interactions with a particular individual and that individual’s social circle.¹⁰⁵ At BatuBelah, Suklu’s role as the individual centre of creative expression is extended physically to engage with others, whether through his own socially engaged work, which expands his role as a teacher beyond campus and into his personal, interactive and social spaces, or through the interactive sculpture that he generates in what Beuys described as “active thinking”—thinking that does not rely solely on intellectual

¹⁰⁴ M. Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2004), 118–20. Kwon presents a typology of community arts practice.

¹⁰⁵ “BBAS History”, <https://batubelahartspace.wordpress.com/bbas-history/>.

reflection, but incorporates thinking through movement and making. Beuys himself claimed teaching was his greatest work of art, and this commitment to the broader (extra-institutional) notions of the artist as teacher are another feature Tisna and Suklu share.¹⁰⁶

Unlike Tisna, however, Suklu does not refer specifically to Beuys in the formulation of his theoretical or practical approaches. Instead, he has found legitimation through actor-network theory (ANT). Initially proposed by Bruno Latour in the late 1980s, ANT is focused on the reassembly of the social, rather than its deconstruction. It allows for the agency of non-human entities such as “microbes, scallops, rocks and ships”.¹⁰⁷

Instead of seeing human relations as a stable entity called the “social”, ANT maps the “associations” between all factors within a context, including inanimate objects and non-human living things. It sees the social as inherently unstable and shifting in response to the agency of these things.

This same attitude is inherent in Suklu’s interactive works, which open up his personal making practice to the intervention of others, the weather and other contingent conditions. It is also embedded in the making of his abstract paintings, which address both seen and unseen things. In describing this process, Suklu says:

I was conscious of observing matter and objects; then I discovered a method for the “observation” of objects. I saw that there was something other than the objects I was observing ... then this other picture is what pushes me to improvise with “de-formative” forms—a clear picture of the object’s threshold of reality.... When I look at many things or objects, I see “unseen things” outside of them all. They appear as a threshold of reality outside of the presence of those objects, which nurtures my intuition to immediately celebrate material form, but actually it’s not about the forms, there are things more important than materiality.¹⁰⁸

Interestingly, Nicolas Bourriaud gave a breathless account of contemporary European artists’ move towards a similarly anti-anthropocentric

¹⁰⁶ Beuys’ often-cited quote is from an interview with Willoughby Sharp, “An Interview with Joseph Beuys”, *Artforum* 8, no. 4 (1969): 40–7.

¹⁰⁷ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

¹⁰⁸ Sunarta, Suklu, and Sukarelawanto, *The Unseen Things*, 38.

“speculative realism” during a public lecture held in association with the Biennale Jogja XII in 2015, in which Bourriard seemed to position this move as the next development in avant-garde art practice.¹⁰⁹ During the panel discussion afterwards, Bourriard was challenged to differentiate speculative realism from older forms of animist belief—like those practised in Balinese Hinduism—which assign agency to material and immaterial forms. Bourriard declined, with the defence that determining and arguing about the originators of such thinking was irrelevant. The audience, deeply invested in breaking down Eurocentric canons that both appropriate and then recentre knowledge-systems from elsewhere without acknowledgement, seemed unsympathetic.

In her account of living traditional Balinese arts, Hildred Geertz emphasises that “life for the Balinese is largely taken up with transactions with the unseen world”.¹¹⁰ Such transactions with the immaterial and non-human world, although unseen, also animate Suklu’s work, which unites contemporary philosophies such as ANT with the unseen elements inherent in Balinese culture.

Drawing on the Personal-Social-Interactive

In the beginning my friends would say: Suklu, why are you always taking up things from outside of yourself? No, that’s what I need. I need it to keep growing.¹¹¹

—I Wayan “Suklu” Sujana

Suklu fervidly defends his openness to heteronomy: influences from tradition, local and Western modernism, sociality, ANT and the unseen things of our world. Yet he simultaneously grounds this in his own autonomous drive, what he needs. Here we see how Suklu’s reinterpretation of traditions—modernist traditions from Bali and abstract expressionist traditions from “the West”—demonstrate the continuity of this commitment to both exogenous and endogenous discourses, and the entanglement of autonomous and heteronomous practices.

¹⁰⁹ 17 November 2015, Gedung Societet Militer, Yogyakarta. Further descriptions of the lecture can be found in chapter 3.

¹¹⁰ Hildred Geertz, *Images of Power: Balinese Paintings Made for Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994), 25.

¹¹¹ Suklu Sujana, in conversation with the author, Elly Kent, Klungkung, 18 October 2013.

Suklu’s conception of a trivalent framework for his practice makes it possible to classify *Musim Bergeser* as a personal work, in contrast to the social work of *Drawing on Novels*. It also provides a position for *Jejak* and BatuBelah Art Space as interactive spaces that manifest encounters between the personal and social. Yet these boundaries are slippery; the unconscious charcoal drawings on novels strongly resemble the meandering lines of *Musim Bergeser*—all the more so when we know that the social practice of *Drawing on Novels* was preceded by a near identical personal practice. The educational nature of the social spaces extends into the interactive spaces, allowing BatuBelah to act as a focal point for Suklu’s creative autonomy and for his social work. Plans for interactive bamboo objects are just as likely to emerge from that personal drawing practice, a daily “mantra” for Suklu. It is evident, then, that the personal-interactive-social construct is as much an exercise in opening up to different kinds of practice as it is in defining limits.

The correlation between ANT, Balinese-Hindu animism and anti-anthropocentrism demonstrates that in Suklu’s work there is a concurrence, rather than a convergence, between modernist discourse (Latour defends ANT as distinct from post-modernist sociological theory) and Balinese philosophical traditions.¹¹² Instead of constructing a framework of comparison or juxtaposition between these different discourses Suklu’s work reveals common threads. These common threads form the basis for a practice that is continuously working against a priori understandings of the role of the individual and society, the artist and the lay person, the object and the experience.

While Suklu’s paintings can be recognised as the kind of “discrepant abstraction” that deliberately eschews the autonomous purity of the dominant paradigm of abstraction, Suklu’s social artworks are equally evasive of the signifiers commonly assigned to participatory practice. They are neither emancipatory nor self-conscious; they are social practices but are also training for the development of individual expression. Suklu’s interactive works—bamboo installations and his open art space—are perhaps the most conventional of his works, and yet these rigid structures are entirely determined through their usefulness as settings for the creative works of others.

Suklu’s careful mapping out of his various ideas and his conscious attempt to find common ground in contemporary, modernist and traditional arts practices provide a useful example of the diverse approaches

¹¹² Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 11.

to, and influences on, specific artists' practices in Indonesia. At its most structured, Suklu's work provides us with a Venn diagram-like description of practices which overlap and are mutually informative. At its most deconstructive, it pulls apart these careful circles and weaves them together. Suklu's consistent commitment to pushing the boundaries between disciplines of art, and to departitioning the distinctions between traditional and modern, local and foreign, individual and collective, demonstrates precisely the "artistic ideology" that Yuliman identified. This ideology links generations of artists and dissimilar practices—such as abstraction and representation—through a commitment to the expressive power of art.

In his 1987 "Estetik Yang Merabunkan" (Aesthetics that blind) essay, Yuliman criticises the tendency of contemporary painters and historians to ignore the painting traditions of Indonesia's past, as well as current practices like glass painting among "commoners". He complained that "the belief that there is only one frame of reference (perspective, values, and opinions) that is right and legitimate for art—a universal frame of reference—has infected our vision".¹¹³ In 1987, when Yuliman published his essay complaining that Indonesian artists had historically failed to engage with Indonesia's painting traditions, Suklu was living in Pengosekan, a village renowned for its unique traditions among many Balinese artists' communities. Tisna and Arahmaiani were both attracting attention as emerging artists from the Faculty of Art and Design in ITB, Tisna as a fresh graduate and Arahmaiani as a rebellious student. All three artists were grappling with how the distinct cultural and social contexts—the matrices—they were cast within should inform their artistic practice. By this time the Indonesian art scene had spent a decade wrestling with the search for a contemporary voice (or voices). Yuliman himself was embedded in the efforts of an emerging generation that challenged the status quo from the mid-1970s. Many of the artists who now represent Indonesia on the international art stage were part of this unruly young cohort, and from the outset their agenda sought to return art to the realm of the people. But this agenda was a return to values that had been embedded in Indonesian art since its very beginning.

¹¹³ Sanento Yuliman, "Estetik Yang Merabunkan" [Blinding Aesthetics], first published in *Tempo*, 20 June 1987. In *Dua Seni Rupa: Sepilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman*, ed. Asikin Hasan (Jakarta: Yayasan Kalam, 2001), 22.



Figure 12: Detail of a collaborative installation created by I Wayan "Suklu" Sujana and his students on the grounds of Suklu's BatuBelah space in Klungkung, Bali (2013).