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# From Purgation to Remembrance: Memorialising the May 1998 Violence in Post-Authoritarian Indonesian Visual Art

Wulan Dirgantoro 

## Introduction

In Yogyakarta, on 18 October 1998, Chinese Indonesian artist FX Harsono performed *Korban* (Burned Victims) as part of his solo exhibition at Cemeti Art House.<sup>1</sup> In a disused construction site near the gallery, Harsono planted nine torso-shaped wooden sculptures attached to steel poles. Harsono explained to the audience that he wanted to show the processes behind his works and, specifically, how his works dealt with ‘the current happenings in Jakarta’. He then brought out five picket signs and proceeded to tell the audience about the challenges in finding out the truth about what happened during the riots of May 1998.

As the artist began his speech, he pulled out the signs one by one, punctuating his narrative on every second sentence until four signs were placed opposite the torsos. Written on these signs were the words *Rusuh* (Riot), *Kerusuhan* (Rioting), *Dibuat rusuh* (The riot was made up), and *Rekayasa agar rusuh* (The riot was manipulated). The artist then burned the signs one by one with a torch gun before proceeding to burn the torsos. When most of the picket signs had turned into ashes, Harsono then pulled out the last sign, which stated, *Siapa yang bertanggung jawab?* (Who was responsible?) (fig. 1). He then walked, with his knees bent, along the line of the burning torsos and slowly lowered himself to the ground carrying the sign, while stating, ‘we lowered ourselves until we nearly crawled on the ground to ask this question, but we will never know who was responsible for this’. The burned sculptures were then displayed as part of his solo exhibition in the gallery space (fig. 2).

This article starts with Harsono’s evocative work as it highlights a turning point in his artistic imperative to document and memorialise instances of anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia. In Harsono’s performance installation, the artist depicted the most recent incidence: the riots of 12–14 May 1998 in Medan, Jakarta, Solo, and a few other cities. At the end of the authoritarian New Order regime

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Figure 1. FX Harsono, *Korban (Burned Victims)*, 1998, performance, 8:40 min. Still images from performance documentation: FX Harsono, *Performance Art: Burn Victim*, by FX Harsono, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmTaFNITWHE>.



Figure 2. FX Harsono, *Korban (Burned Victims)*, 1998, wood, steel, and synthetic rubber, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

(1966–98), the riots saw ethnic Chinese-owned properties and businesses destroyed and hundreds of Chinese Indonesian women raped in a concerted attack. The performance referenced the harrowing stories of people trapped in their homes and other buildings during the burning and looting over that turbulent week in May 1998.

Harsono's performance installation is one of the earliest artworks produced about the May '98 riots and one of the most enduring memorialisations of the riots in contemporary Indonesian art.<sup>2</sup> The artwork (along with the exhibition) captured the main visual narrative from the recent anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> General discussions of the artwork have firmly positioned it as a visual testimony of the mass riots, yet so far none have discussed the processes by which the artwork articulated the violence and its aftermath.<sup>4</sup> Given that more than twenty years later the perpetrators behind these riots are still at large, challenges remain in how best to remember the violence in contemporary Indonesia.

This article will discuss how visual art practices have contributed to memorialising the violence in post-authoritarian Indonesia. It examines and compares two acts of memorialisation to highlight how visual practices in Indonesia can articulate the complexities around remembrance and representation. Firstly, the article discusses how artmaking by one of Indonesia's foremost contemporary artists seeks to document and mark the traces of the most recent anti-Chinese violence in the country. I begin with examining the performance *Korban* in providing a cathartic release from the horror of the violence. I will discuss materiality and embodied memory in the artwork, emphasising that Harsono's performance brought back the importance of the senses for making sense of the violence. Following the discussion of the performance, I will discuss the installation as a form of counter-monument to memorialise the riots' victims. I will conclude with a discussion on *Monumen Mei 1998* (May 1998 Monument, 2015), a state-sponsored memorial site for the victims of the May 1998 riots in Jakarta, and consider how the monument's iconographies complicate public conversation and remembrance in contemporary Indonesia regarding the racial and sexual violence.

### **Chinese Indonesian Identity and Public Memory after 1998**

In the aftermath of communal violence, survivors and affected communities need attention, support, acceptance, and care, and condemnation and rejection of the acts that caused their suffering. In the context of the May '98 riots, communal violence not only shattered the lives of the individuals who were directly affected and the sense of communality, community members also suddenly realised that they could no longer rely on each other for support. Scholars have noted that Chinese Indonesians were failed by many levels of Indonesian society: the lower class who perpetrated the violence, the political class who allowed them to do it, and the state who subsequently repressed the violent memories.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the breakdown of social and moral order within several large Indonesian cities during the May '98 riots has been described by scholars as deeply traumatic.<sup>6</sup> Use of the

English word 'trauma' to describe the events indicates the violence's foreignness and how it erupted into Indonesian public memory.<sup>7</sup>

As an ethnic minority group, Chinese Indonesians are no strangers to traumatic memories. Since the Dutch colonial era, targeted violence and systemic discrimination have been central parts of ethnic Chinese history.<sup>8</sup> A myth of Chinese economic dominance has developed over time, where, even now, it is popularly believed that the Chinese control up to seventy per cent of the national economy.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, their inability to lay claim to indigenous modes of belonging in Indonesia has meant that Chinese Indonesians have been perpetually viewed as foreigners whose national belonging and loyalty have always been questioned.<sup>10</sup>

The May '98 riots are pivotal to the post-New Order Chinese trauma narrative, not only because they are the most recent major episode of anti-Chinese violence but also because the tragedy brought a stark realisation among Chinese Indonesians that 'the assimilation project had indeed failed'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remembering the May '98 riots has faced many challenges. As Purdey argues, the riots incited among the Chinese a sense of renewed awareness of the inevitability of 'their ethnicity and particularly their vulnerability in Indonesia, no matter how hard they had tried to assimilate'.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the challenges of remembering the difficult past in the broader public memory, scholars have noted that public memory forms when people remember in and through inter-subjective relationships with other members of the public.<sup>13</sup> Kendall R. Phillips expresses the view that memories affect and are affected by various publics. To speak of public memory, he says, 'is to speak of a remembrance together as a crucial aspect of our togetherness'.<sup>14</sup> Public memory is also bound up with public feeling in ways that allow for coherent stories to be told and coherent responses to be expressed.<sup>15</sup> Thus, public monuments and memorials often fulfil the function of remembrance as they provide a common symbol that unites the public. However, as the following discussion on *Monumen Mei 1998* will demonstrate, despite the good intentions of Komnas Perempuan (National Commission on Violence Against Women) and community groups to provide a commemorative space, the public memory of the May '98 riots is deeply bound up with a compulsion to forget, which reflects the problems of representing and remembering the traumatic past in a public space.

After the fall of the New Order regime, many Chinese Indonesian artists used the new-found freedom to challenge entrenched social and cultural stereotypes. Among these artists were FX Harsono, Dadang Christanto, Agus Suwage, Anna Zuchriana, Tintin Wulia, Octora Chan, and Yaya Sung. They began to openly explore subject matter that put forth their individual and collective memories of being 'Chinese' in Indonesia. The distinction between public memory and collective memory matters in this context. According to Casey, the public is a group formed in a social encounter situated in time and space while the collective is a group formed by a mediated form of common address to separated individuals or isolated smaller groups. This means that the members of a collective lack the means to develop the message amongst themselves.<sup>16</sup> Yet, I argue, such 'lack'

provides an important space for the stories of anguish and horror that belong to individual experiences of trauma and that do not fit the coherent stories and spatial anchors found in public memory. For example, Yaya Sung (b. 1986) created the series *Jalan Kemenangan* (Victory Street, 2012) as part of her ongoing reflection on belonging and Chinese Indonesian identity. Sung took photographs of Chinese Indonesian families and individuals in their living rooms.<sup>17</sup> The images were digitally manipulated by removing the figures' skin colour and facial features; the artist then stitched gold thread to replace the skin, the figures now glowing against the mundane background.

In erasing skin colour as one of the markers of racial identity, Sung's work seemed to appeal for a sense of commonality, rather than difference, between 'us' and 'them'. Yet, in using gold thread to replace skin colour, the series emphasised the sense of ambiguity that surrounds Chinese Indonesian identity. The stereotype of Chinese Indonesians as exclusive, apolitical, and unassimilable became more visible through the gold skin covering.<sup>18</sup> Sung's series can also be seen to illustrate the processes of reconstructing her collective memory through art-making via her interactions with community members. Such interactions were manifested through memory-work, a method to investigate memories that are linked to materiality and human labour. Sung's work continues the art-making trajectory in post-authoritarian Indonesia, where the current generation of artists explores the intersections between art, activism, history, and memory.

When FX Harsono created his performance and installation *Korban* (Burned Victims) in 1998, such memory-work had only just begun in Indonesia. James E. Young, in his study of post-Holocaust memorialisation, introduces the notion of the counter-monument to describe the shift in public memorialisation of the Holocaust in Germany. Counter-monuments there can be characterised by a rejection of the monumentality and rigidity of memorials that reflected fascist belief.<sup>19</sup> Young characterises a counter-monument by its use of negative spaces and elements of interactivity with the audience. His definition of counter-monument is instructive in explaining how *Korban's* horizontal arrangement followed a similar trajectory. The New Order regime was known to place a big emphasis on its militaristic origin. For example, main roads in major Indonesian cities are named after military heroes, and statues of the said heroes can be seen prominently in civic spaces.

As a Chinese Indonesian artist, Harsono occupies a complex position as a witness, victim, mediator, and 'memory maker'.<sup>20</sup> As a memory maker who shares in collective images and narratives of the past, the artist not only draws in repertoires of explicit and implicit knowledge about violence in his work but also actively attempts to shape collective memory about that violence. The following section discusses the materiality and embodied memory in *Korban*, in particular how it utilised the senses to connect images of the violence of May 1998 with the collective memory.

### **Embodied Memory, Materiality, and the Senses in *Korban***

Sung's work *Victory Street* exemplified an open exploration of Chinese Indonesian identity in the post-authoritarian era, but before the regime's fall on 21 May 1998, Franciscus Xaverius (FX) Harsono had to negotiate his cultural identity. Harsono was born in 1949 in Blitar, East Java. He is one of Indonesia's foremost contemporary artists, with a career that has spanned more than four decades. Harsono's diverse body of work, from painting and installation to performance art, shows his commitment to the intersection between artistic practices and social engagement. He initially trained as a painter at the Indonesia Art Institute (ISI, formerly ASRI) in Yogyakarta from 1969 to 1974 before moving to the Jakarta Art Institute (IKJ) in 1987. He currently divides his time between Jakarta and Yogyakarta.

Harsono has stated that during the early years of his career his Chineseness was never openly discussed.<sup>21</sup> His peers were aware that Harsono is of ethnic Chinese background, but Harsono himself preferred to keep a low profile over this matter. He explained that this was something considered to be natural for many Chinese Indonesians during the New Order.<sup>22</sup> Despite his involvement in the progressive experimental group *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (Indonesian New Art Movement) from 1975 to 1987 and his solo practice as an artist, Harsono rarely engaged with his Chinese Indonesian identity before 1998.

The catastrophic events of May 1998 changed his perspective, and from thereon Harsono has consistently created artworks that explore the issues of politics, memory, and Chinese Indonesian identity. The performance *Korban* marked this turn towards documenting and marking the violence against Chinese Indonesians. It was performed only once, in front of a small audience in Yogyakarta before the opening of the artist's solo exhibition at Cemeti Art House.

At the time, Harsono's performance was not the only artwork that referred to the body, identity, and violence. As James T. Siegel notes, the violence, particularly the rapes of Chinese Indonesian women, was an 'event at the limit', a horrific event that existed outside the long history of anti-Chinese incidents in the past. While early media reports seemed to suggest that the broader public tolerated the looting, they unanimously agreed that the rapes were acts beyond the limits of toleration and were uncivilised acts of cruelty (*biadab*). The media also reported on bodies abandoned on the streets, which showed evidence of mob violence.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the destruction of social and moral order as perpetrated on Chinese Indonesian bodies and others sharpened the focus of artistic production after the May '98 riots. Mella Jaarsma (b. 1960) organised a street performance titled *Pribumi-pribumi* (Natives, 1998–99). The Dutch-born, Indonesian resident organised seven fellow expatriates on Malioboro Street, Yogyakarta, on 3 July 1998, to cook stir-fried frogs' legs (*swikee*), a Chinese delicacy considered to be *haram* (unclean) by local Javanese Muslims. The stir-fry was then served on paper labelled with the text *pribumi*. During this tense period, it was common to see the text *pribumi* affixed to or hastily written on the door of a business or residential property to indicate that a *pribumi* (native or indigenous Indonesian) owned the property and should therefore be spared from the looting. Jaarsma's performance opened up

conversations between locals and non-locals on food, race, and religion.<sup>24</sup> In another example, the choreographer Gusmiati Suid (1942–2001) produced a dance theatre piece, *Api Dalam Sekam* (Fire in the Chaff, 1998), the second part of her famous dance trilogy. The phrase *api dalam sekam* is an Indonesian expression that means a latent danger, which implied the burning during the riots was part of a hidden, systemic conspiracy. The dance was performed at the second Arts Summit Indonesia (19 September – 19 October 1998), the biggest performing arts festival in Indonesia, effectively bringing the political onto the typically neutral field of contemporary dance.<sup>25</sup>

Harsono explained that he created *Korban* and other related works during a six-month period, between the riots in May and his exhibition's opening in October 1998, as his reaction to anti-Chinese violence.<sup>26</sup> The self-curated solo exhibition, entitled *Victims*, consisted of two installations, the abovementioned *Korban* and *Ancaman* (The Threat, 1998), and several large-scale drawings. The performance that preceded *Korban* was also planned as part of the exhibition. As Harsono stated at the beginning of his performance, process has always been an integral part of his art-making, as has his use of everyday objects since his involvement in *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*.<sup>27</sup>

The performance *Korban* appeared to function as a cathartic release from the violence's horror. The artist explained that he experienced a sense of overwhelming fear during the riots of 12–15 May, similar to what he experienced in 1965.<sup>28</sup> While some of the looting and burning occurred around his neighbourhood, Harsono was not present to witness the violence because he had to leave Jakarta to attend his mother's funeral in his home town of Blitar, East Java. As the artist returned to Jakarta two weeks after the riots, he gained access to photographic documentation from his activist friends regarding the lootings and the people trapped in Jakarta's burning shopping malls. This became his visual reference for all the works in the exhibition.<sup>29</sup> This documentation, together with media images, can be seen clearly in the drawing *Thy Kingdom Come* (1998), which was also shown in the exhibition.

The use of atrocity images in the artist's art-making appeared to be drawn from the idea that photography's indexical immediacy combines affective power with an evidentiary claim.<sup>30</sup> In the performance, the use of picket signs reflected the signs and banners that the students carried on the streets of many large cities in Indonesia. Importantly, the images of charred and blackened bodies as represented in the performance were intended for the audience to sense the horror of the violence. The evocation of the senses, such as the heat of the fire on the skin from the burning wood, the smell from the smoke and gasoline, the artist's (and the audience's) voice, and the recognition of other bodies in the audience highlights a multisensory experience of the performance (rather than merely a visual one) to bring up the memory of the violence.

In parallel with the visual reference from the photographs, these elements in the performance further activated the collective memory of the violence through co-witnessing across different spaces and temporality between the artist as a

witness and mediator and the audience. Through the performance's testimonial function, the artist, who had collated the testimony from witnesses, became a secondary witness, while the viewer became a tertiary witness of the same 'proof' of occurrence.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, as Yannis Hamilakis explains, memory and sensorial experiences are deeply interconnected. Every sensorial perception is full of memories, conjuring up various times and enabling the present to co-exist with various selective pasts.<sup>32</sup> The performance's evocation of the senses pushed the audience to sense more and feel more, to connect the images with the violence.

The connection between the images and the senses in the performance was critical. As scholars have noted, in the early months after the riots, the violence was reported by Indonesian and international media as a specifically ethnic problem arising from economic disadvantage caused by the complicity of Chinese Indonesians with the corrupt New Order regime. As a result, the Indonesian public largely distanced themselves emotionally from the violence.<sup>33</sup> In pushing the audience to re-experience the violence through their senses, the performance brought back the impact of physical and mental destruction on the body that the media did not or would not convey.

If the performance functioned as a cathartic device, the installation shifted the work from purgation to remembrance. The installation was composed of the artefacts from the performance. The nine charred torso-shaped wooden sculptures were split in half or quartered and suspended by steel wires from the four corners of steel frames. The burning process in the performance helped to achieve the effect of disfiguration and reconfiguration of forms. The frames were then placed horizontally on the floor in a neat row. The arrangement of the torsos from vertical (during the performance) to horizontal (in the installation) can also be seen to represent the loss of one's capacity to stand and to remain standing in the aftermath of violence. In this regard, the installation echoed Abidin Kusno's discussion on how Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta were left extremely vulnerable. They were unable to count on the support of the state or the rest of the Indonesian middle class.<sup>34</sup>

The installation also continued the performance's work as testimony, by refusing the performance's usual status of 'live-ness'. Instead of disappearance and ephemerality as expected in the aftermath of performance art, the artist firmly placed the material transformation of the objects and the documentation at the heart of the installation. For example, at the end of each frame, the artist placed a pair of burned shoes or sandals. Here, the objects were transformed from their readymade state by another destruction process that mimicked the violent riots. The burned footwear served as a conduit to remembering the people who lost their lives in the burning and looting.

Furthermore, the transformation from solid wood and readymade objects into charred remains (while still retaining their indexical traces) echoed the bodies left by the riots. As James E. Young argues in his description of a counter-monument, 'Where the "monumental" had traditionally used its size to humiliate or cow viewers into submission, ... this memorial – in its humanly proportioned forms –

would put people on an even footing with memory'.<sup>35</sup> What is important here is how, as Young articulates, 'counter monuments have the capacity to break down "collective memory" into collected memories of individuals'.<sup>36</sup> The horizontal arrangement of Harsono's installation echoes Young's description and function of counter-monument. Importantly, the installation speaks of its intention to remember the individuals who were killed and the terrible meanings of their deaths, which are now multiplied, not merely unified.

The installation has travelled to various exhibition venues since the artist first created it in 1998. After its initial exhibition at Cemeti, Yogyakarta, in 1998, it was presented in Singapore (2010) and Jakarta (2015) and, more recently, in *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History* at the Asia Society, New York (2017–18). The installation's design has remained largely the same; the torsos are suspended on a rectangular frame to provide some stability, with the performance video projected onto a wall either at one end of or beside the installation. As the video watches over the row of nine charred torsos, the installation becomes a site of remembrance, a proxy trauma site. The installation invites the audience to emotionally invest in an imaginative reconstruction of the trauma site and to complete the image of loss associated with it. The visitor's material body remediates the absent bodies that comprise the scene of trauma through their proximity to and interaction with the art objects in the installation. The visitor is allowed to feel, and feel about, the past in a process that performs the non-recuperability of memory.

While Chinese Indonesians have enjoyed a resurgence of Chinese culture in post-authoritarian Indonesia, the May 1998 riots' traumatic memories remain unintegrated in the public memory. In the relative absence of acknowledgement and memorialisation of the violence until the inauguration of *Monumen Mei 1998* in 2015, the sensorial experience as evoked in Harsono's installation plays a double duty of testimonial admission (through the narrative of loss) and cognition (through factual information) as a way to remember the dead and the marginalised in Indonesian history. As the installation is representative of both contemporary art and human rights activism in Southeast Asia,<sup>37</sup> the work shifts from testimony as a document of truth, or as a proof of realness, towards its inability to reflect an all-encompassing historical truth, becoming thereby a more poetic and subjective form of documentation.

FX Harsono's more recent body of work, from *nDudah* (2009) and *Pilgrimage to History* (2013) to *Memorandum of Inhumane Acts* (2016), shows how the artist has been working as a historian over the past ten years. Oral history interviews conducted by the artist as shown in the video work *nDudah* engage with the collective memory of past historical violence against Chinese Indonesians that can be traced back to Indonesia's revolutionary period (1945–49).<sup>38</sup> Harsono's installation of tombstone rubbings on cloth banners in *Pilgrimage to History* shows how the artist made visible the largely forgotten names of Chinese Indonesians whose bodies now lie in various mass graves.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 3. *Monumen Mei 1998* (May 1998 Monument), 2015, concrete and steel, 400 × 200 × 150 cm (approx.), Pondok Rangan Public Cemetery, Jakarta. Photo: the author.

### **Remembering Violence in Public Memory: The May 1998 Monument**

The unveiling of *Monumen Mei 1998* with a quiet ceremony on 13 May 2015 marked a major step towards remembering and rebuilding the public memory of Indonesia's most recent racial violence. However, as the following section will discuss, the monument illustrates the challenges and ambiguities around remembering the violence of the past.

The monument resulted from a long campaign by Komnas Perempuan (National Commission on Violence Against Women), an independent institution that deals with women's basic human rights in Indonesia, along with other victim advocacy groups to establish a memorial site for the mass riots. The groups



Figure 4. View towards the memorial site at Pondok Rangan Public Cemetery, Jakarta. Photo: the author.

managed to secure 90 million rupiahs (approximately 8,500 Australian dollars according to the current exchange rate) from various funding bodies and the support of Jakarta's provincial government to establish a memorial site.<sup>40</sup> The site chosen for the memorial is located within TPU Pondok Rangan (Pondok Rangan Public Cemetery), the largest cemetery complex in Jakarta, about thirty kilometres east of the site of the riots. The first ceremonial stone for the site was laid by Jakarta's first ethnic Chinese Indonesian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, in 2014, before the whole site was finally completed on 13 May 2015 (fig. 3).

The 200-square-metre memorial site consists of the monument on one side and 113 graves of the unidentified victims on the other side. The monument is located alongside an open area with a small plaza and a concrete path that bisects the

whole site. As I walked around the site, frangipani trees, palm trees, and small shrubs were dotted around the site but barely provided shade from the midday tropical sun. The red ground was bare and dry, and goats could be seen wandering around the area. Over the tidy graves, small green patches of grass could be seen, perhaps indicating how the site was intended to look: covered by an even green lawn, such as can be seen in other parts of the large cemetery complex (fig. 4).

The monument was designed by Awan Simatupang, a sculptor who has created several public sculptures in Jakarta. He worked together with the victim advocacy groups to establish the design of the monument.<sup>41</sup> The artist explained that the monument was intended to memorialise the victims and recognise their families' ongoing healing processes after the May 1998 riots.<sup>42</sup> The four-metre-tall monument, made of concrete, is presented in the form of an outstretched hand covered by a drape of fabric that pools at the monument's base. On the front of the monument, a vertical line runs down from the centre of the open palm to the middle section. Twelve neat horizontal lines, made of steel cable painted in red, occupy the line's lower half. The twelve lines represent a row of stitches that appear to 'mend' the vertical line. This impression is made stronger by a giant sewing needle that pierces the top of the vertical line, the needle connected by a red 'thread' made from the same material as the row of stitches.

To explain the monument, a plaque at its base is inscribed with the following text:

The May 1998 tragedy is a dark history for Indonesia because the violence that had robbed thousands of lives also included sexual violence against women. This tragedy was the culmination of social, economic and political turbulence that gave birth to the Reform era. The May 1998 Monument with the symbol of needle and thread is to sew the wound and the hope, as a memorialisation to the nation's history and respect for the victims, hoping that such an event will not repeat itself.<sup>43</sup>

About five metres from the monument, another plaque stands on an elevated base in the centre of the small plaza. This plaque bears the formal signature of the governor, and it reads:

Let us pray for the victims of the May '98 tragedy. We hope that this event will never happen again. Their sacrifice lit the fire of the Reformation towards a more communal, dignified and peace-loving Indonesia.

On a superficial level, the memorial site seems to serve the broader public's need to remember past violence. The artist's design appears to be sensitive to the groups' appeal that the memorial not portray the violence (sexual or otherwise).<sup>44</sup> The plaques acknowledge the violence and the desire to move forward. However,

two factors stand out from the site that cast doubt on the site's efficacy as a place of remembrance for the Chinese Indonesian community.

Firstly, the site's considerable distance from the places where the violence took place reflects the challenges of remembering the violence *in situ*. As Abidin Kusno discusses in his study, the development of shiny new buildings by the provincial government and private developers on the sites of the violence was seen to deny the Chinese Indonesians' wish to remember the violence.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, while the violence had been mainly targeted at Chinese Indonesians, many non-Chinese Indonesians were also trapped inside the burning buildings. Monika Winarnita explains that there was some reluctance within some circles in the Chinese Indonesian community to build a memorial on the actual site as it could potentially be perceived to be also honouring those who might have been looters and possibly even the perpetrators.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the monument would become a commemorative site for the loss in the broader community and would lose its specificity to the Chinese Indonesian public memory.

Secondly, the wording of both plaques indicates the ambivalence about remembering past violence. The plaque situated at the base of the monument informs the viewer why the monument was erected in the first place and makes clear reference to the horrific sexual violence.<sup>47</sup> However, the second plaque, which bears the then governor's signature, indicates a desire to move on by stating that the victims 'sacrificed' their lives for a peace-loving Indonesia. In this regard, the memorial site seems to have been constructed for purposes other than just remembering. More precisely, the site can be seen as a communal aspiration to emerge from an unresolved conflict and as a place of more complex processes of pacification. The second plaque indicates that the unresolved conflict is best left in the past and that it is time to move forward. Problematically, the text's use of the term 'sacrifice' also implies that the victims and survivors voluntarily offered their lives and possessions for the sake of a better Indonesia, whereas, in reality, they were never given this option.

Importantly, the monument represents a deeply sensitive and highly contentious aspect of the violence. Scholars have noted that it has been incredibly difficult for the survivors of sexual violence to speak about their experience due to socio-cultural and religious stigma.<sup>48</sup> While the monument may have been intended to represent healing processes, its iconographies place the gendered dimension of the violence in the public consciousness. Simatupang explained that in consultation with the victim advocacy groups, the needle and thread symbols were chosen to represent the dominant occupation of the mothers who lost their children during the riots.<sup>49</sup> The symbols thus guide the viewer to focus on 'mending the tear' or how communities have worked together since the riots to stitch the wounds from the past and move towards healing.

I propose that, on closer inspection, the monument's iconography may reveal more about the unresolved community trauma and the limitations of articulating sexual violence in the post-New Order visual landscape. The open, outstretched hand may refer to the Indonesian phrase *tangan terbuka* (literally, 'open hand') which

means generosity, similar to the English phrase 'open arms'; it is a gesture that fits the monument's positive message. However, the positive gesture can only be faintly discerned beneath the heavy folds of fabric. The hidden, unseen hand elevated from the ground by the fabric-like stele seems to suggest that such a gesture of generosity and openness is, in fact, still elusive in the reconciliation process.

Scholars have noted that in the months after the riots, the unprecedented nature of the mass rapes prompted denial and disbelief by the larger Indonesian public and even accusations that the news of the rapes had been exaggerated to discredit Muslim organisations in Indonesia. Instead of demanding justice for the victims, the mass media reports became a field for debate about 'truth' claims, which caused even deeper pain for the victims and their families.<sup>50</sup> The systematic and extremely violent nature of the rapes also caused differing responses to the events; for example, Komnas Perempuan framed the rapes as 'violence perpetrated towards Indonesian women by the state and patriarchy', thus eliminating the racial factor of the events. They believe that framing sexual violence within a racial perspective will not contribute to community healing.<sup>51</sup>

The discourse is indeed reflected in the plaque situated at the base of the monument, which fails to mention that the rapes were perpetrated against *Chinese* Indonesian women. While the selective remembering has been attributed to the organisation's political framing,<sup>52</sup> it also points towards the rapes as an impossible memory that refuses to be incorporated into a coherent public narrative.

In this regard, trauma's original meaning as a physical wound is visible in the monument as a tear in the fabric. Furthermore, the sculpted hand is fused with the fabric to represent the trauma as a rupture in the public memory. The use of cloth as a projection of the human body is already apparent in the medical field. For example, the use of woven gauze with its delicate fibres as a bandage to be placed on an open wound is to mimic (and replace) the missing skin. The same weave of threads in tailoring terms can also be called a lining, which refers to both the inner layer of a garment and the protective membrane inside our various body parts. Inadvertently, in exposing the fabric rather than the body, the monument's intended meaning appears to be reversed; instead of healing the trauma as the artist has intended, it merely affirms the trauma.

In remembering the victims of the most recent racial and sexual violence in Indonesia, the design of *Monumen Mei '98* is caught between appeasing public memory and healing community division and political tension. The monument's design, which focuses on healing, bypasses the unresolved Chinese Indonesian community trauma; thus, it merely highlights the problems in articulating the racial and, particularly, the sexual violence in Indonesian public memory.

## Conclusion

At the twentieth anniversary commemorative event of the May '98 riots held at Monash University in 2018, which I attended, the memories were still very painful for many of the Chinese Indonesian diaspora. Comments from the public showed how public forms of remembrance are deeply bound up with strategies of

forgetting. For example, some members of the Chinese Indonesian diaspora demanded that they should be allowed to move forward, while others, especially those from the younger generations, questioned the silence and wished to know more of this dark episode.<sup>53</sup>

For many Chinese Indonesian artists, including FX Harsono, the May 1998 riots became a turning point where their experiential memory of the traumatic events shaped their artistic practices. FX Harsono's performance installation *Korban* stands out as one of the earliest representations of the trauma from the mass riots. In this regard, the collective trauma became a powerful force for his artistic trajectory. Moreover, as his latest body of work on Chinese Indonesian mass graves, such as *nDudah* (2009), *Pilgrimage to History* (2013) and *Memorandum of Inhumane Acts* (2016), demonstrate, it is necessary to confront the difficult past to have a conversation about the cyclical nature of violence in Indonesian public memory. Despite trauma's trope of unrepresentability in art history, I suggest that in the performance installation *Korban*, it is clear that representation is fundamental to creating and affecting memory, history, and identity of Chinese Indonesians: it mediates the processes by which collective traumas are grasped, explained, narrated, pictured, and transformed.

In contrast to *Korban*, the May 1998 Monument and memorial site situate the collective trauma firmly within the public memory of the violence. According to the groups who campaigned for the memorial, it is the main site of remembrance for the unidentified victims of mass riots and the survivors of sexual violence. The site's topography caters to reconciliation, with a place for laying flowers and for mourning. The site seems to promote narratives of sacrificial heroism as evinced by one of the plaques so that the events in question acquire a redemptive aura.

However, such gestures contrast sharply with the way memory works for individuals who have experienced the events. For those individuals, traumatic memories are characterised by violent and incoherent sensory replay, often accompanied by a sense of pointlessness that the individual finds overwhelming and disabling.<sup>54</sup> As Jane Goodall and Christopher Lee remind us, while public commemorations may be shaped by notions underlying the phrase 'lest we forget', those who suffer from traumatic recall may develop vigilant practices to shield against the threat of its return<sup>55</sup>, such as the Chinese Indonesian community's reluctance to remember the violence *in situ*.

In foregrounding the discussion of FX Harsono's performance installation *Korban* and the May 1998 Monument, I have examined the two works as distinct forms of memorialisation of the victims of the racial and sexual violence. In contrast to the May 1998 Monument's formal memorial statuary, Harsono's work can be considered as a counter-monument. It introduces elements of performativity that are key to experiential memory practices. In the installation, the audience is invited to note both the absence and the presence of the victims through a material form. Despite the intended curative mechanism of the May 1998 Monument, which was supported and officiated by the Jakarta government, its official purpose was less the release of communal guilt than the proclamation that it existed.

As twenty-three years have passed since the mass riots and with no clear resolution or justice for the victims on the horizon, the memory of the violence has begun to fade in Indonesia's collective consciousness. While recollection and remembrance have been at the centre of many artworks that engage with this subject matter, the artists' ability to set the past within social or collective frameworks is vital to the socialisation of the memory. Contemporary artwork that focuses on exploring this difficult memory through new forms may provide the various pathways to healing the community and cultural trauma.

## Notes

1. FX Harsono, *Korban* (Burned Victims), 1998, performance, 8:40 minutes, Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta (exhibition dates 18 October – 23 November 1998).
2. Arahmaiani (b. 1961) also produced a series of charcoal drawings and a performance piece based on her experience during the riots, which she exhibited and performed in Manila in 1999. See Susan Ingham, 'Powerlines: Alternative Art and Infrastructure in Indonesia in the 1990s' (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 2008).
3. For discussion and analysis of the May 1998 riots see, for example, James T. Siegel, 'Early Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998 in Jakarta', *Indonesia* 66 (1998): 74–108; and Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006). See also Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
4. See, for example, H.G. Masters, 'This Is History', *ArtAsiaPacific* 85 (2013): 115–23; Iola Lenzi, 'FX Harsono at SAM: How Exhibitions Can Build the Canon', *C-Arts*, 24 April 2010, [http://www.trfineart.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/c-arts-FX-Harsono-at-SAM\\_-How-Exhibitions-can-Build-the-Canon.pdf](http://www.trfineart.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/c-arts-FX-Harsono-at-SAM_-How-Exhibitions-can-Build-the-Canon.pdf); and John Clark, 'Negotiating Change in Recent Southeast Asian Art', *Southeast of Now: Directions in Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art* 2, no. 1 (2018): 43–92.
5. See Siegel, 'Early Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998 in Jakarta'; and Abidin Kusno, 'Remembering/Forgetting the May Riots: Architecture, Violence, and the Making of "Chinese Cultures" in Post-1998 Jakarta', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 149–77.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Catherine Smith notes that the term 'trauma' has been used by psychiatrists, activists, politicians, and the mass media in Indonesia since as early as the late 1980s to explain the impact of mass violence. As such, the term in Indonesia is connected to a broader network of psychiatric, cultural, moral, and political systems. See Catherine Smith, *Resilience and the Localisation of Trauma in Aceh, Indonesia* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017). For discussion of trauma in Indonesian visual art see, for example, Wulan Dirgantoro, 'Aesthetics of Silence: Exploring Trauma and Indonesian Paintings after 1965', in *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art, 1945–1990*, ed. Stephen H. Whiteman, Sarena Abdullah, Yvonne Low and Phoebe Scott (Sydney and Singapore: Power Publications and National Gallery of Singapore, 2018), 199–224.
8. See Charlotte Setijadi, 'Memories, Spaces, Identities: An Ethnographic Study of Young Ethnic Chinese in Post-Suharto Indonesia' (PhD diss., La Trobe University, 2014).
9. See Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).
10. Setijadi, 'Memories, Spaces, Identities', p. 9.
11. Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia*, 423.
12. *Ibid.*
13. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Edward Casey, 'Public Memory in Place and Time', in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17–44.
14. Kendall R. Phillips, 'Introduction', in *Framing Public Memory*, 4.
15. Jane Goodall and Christopher Lee, 'Introduction', in *Trauma and Public Memory*, ed. Jane Goodall and Christopher Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–18.
16. Casey, 'Public Memory in Place and Time'.
17. Victory Street is one of the main streets in Glodok, Jakarta's Chinatown, that experienced some of the lootings and burnings during the May 1998 riots. Yaya Sung, interview with the author, Jakarta, 14 December 2018. See Yaya Sung, <http://www.yayasung.com/never-to-forget>.
18. See Esther Kuntjara and Chau Yang-Hoon, 'Reassessing Chinese Indonesian Stereotypes: Two Decades after Reformasi', *South East Asia Research* 28, no. 2 (2020): 199–216.
19. James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss and the Spaces in Between* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

20. Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 180.
21. FX Harsono, interview with the author, Yogyakarta, 21 August 2016.
22. Ibid.
23. See Siegel, 'Early Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998 in Jakarta'; and Stanley, 'The Media as a Control and as a Spur for Acts of Violence', in *Violent Conflicts in Indonesia: Analysis, Representation, Resolution*, ed. Charles Coppel (London: Routledge, 2006), 195–205.
24. For discussion on Jaarsma's work, see Francis Maravillas, 'The Unexpected Guest: Food and Hospitality in Contemporary Asian Art', in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 159–78.
25. See Helly Minarti, 'Modern/Contemporary Dance in Asia: Bodies, Routes and Discourses' (PhD diss., Roehampton University, 2014), 120–57.
26. FX Harsono, email to the author, 28 October 2020.
27. Amanda Katherine Rath, 'Contextualising 'Contemporary Art': Propositions of Critical Artistic Practice in Seni Rupa Kontemporer in Indonesia' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2011), 181.
28. FX Harsono, email to the author, 28 October 2020. The Indonesian genocide of 1965–66 claimed the lives of 500,000–1,000,000 men, women, and children. They were killed primarily because they were deemed to be members of, or affiliated with, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The killings occurred during the height of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. They were led and coordinated by the Indonesian military leadership to destroy the PKI's political base and paved the way for the military's rise to power. Harsono was sixteen at the time of the killings. While he did not directly witness them, he saw bodies from the killings taken across his hometown in horse carts. FX Harsono, interview with the author, Yogyakarta, 21 August 2016. For discussions of the 1965–66 events see, for example, Katharine McGregor, Jess Melvin, and Annie Pohlman, eds, *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965–1966 in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).
29. FX Harsono, email to the author, 28 October 2020.
30. Christine Ross, Tamar Tembeck, and Theodora Tsentas, 'Conflict[ed] Reporting', *Photography and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2015): 153–58.
31. Caroline Wake, 'Regarding the Recording: The Viewer of Video Testimony, the Complexity of Copresence and the Possibility of Tertiary Witnessing', *History and Memory: Studies in Representations of the Past* 25, no. 1 (2015): 111–44.
32. See Yannis Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory and Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197–98.
33. See Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia*; Ariel Heryanto, 'Rape, Race and Reporting,' in *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1999): 299–334; and Stanley, 'The Media as a Control and as a Spur for Acts of Violence'.
34. Kusno, 'Remembering/Forgetting the May Riots'.
35. Young is referring to Peter Eisenman's revised design for the *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe) in Berlin. Young, *The Stages of Memory*, 8–9.
36. Ibid.
37. Bansie Vasvanie, 'After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History,' *ArtAsiaPacific*, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/AfterDarknessSoutheastAsianArtInTheWakeOfHistory>.
38. See Agung Hujatnikajennong, 'Things Happen When We Remember: Memory and History in FX Harsono's Works', in *Things Happen When We Remember: FX Harsono Solo Exhibition*, exhib. cat. (Bandung: Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, 2014), 30–32. See also Mary Heidhues, 'The Anti-Chinese Violence in Java During the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–49,' *Journal of Genocide Research* 14 (2012): 381–401.
39. *nDudah* is a colloquial Javanese word for digging or taking something apart. For discussions of this body of work see, for example, Karen Strassler, 'Zone of Refuge: Fugitive of Memories in the Work of FX Harsono', *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 8, no. 2 (2018): 177–207; and Sally Oey, 'Tracing History', *Nexus Arts*, 4 September 2015, <https://medium.com/@NexusArts/beyond-identity-773ee0aa7a4>.
40. See Dinas Komunikasi, Informatika dan Statistik Pemprov DKI Jakarta, 'Prasasti [Monumen] Mei 1998' (May 1998 Monument), *Pemprov DKI Jakarta*, 01 September 2017, <https://www.jakarta.go.id/artikel/konten/3880/prasasti-mei-98-monumen>.
41. Lenny Tristia Tambun, 'DKI Dukung Pembangunan Monumen Mei 1998 di TPU Pondok Rangon' (DKI Supports the Development of May 1998 Monument in Pondok Rangon Public Cemetery), *beritasatu*, 22 April 2015, <https://www.beritasatu.com/beritasatu/megapolitan/267748/dki-dukung-pembangunan-monumen-mei-1998-di-tpu-pondok-rangon>.
42. Catriona Croft-Cusworth, 'Jakarta Marks a Forgotten Anniversary', *The Interpreter*, 20 May 2015, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/jakarta-marks-forgotten-anniversary>. See also Ati Nurbaiti, 'May 1998 Monument Hailed as "Sign of State Responsibility"', *The Jakarta Post*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/05/15/may-1998-monument-ailed-sign-state-responsibility.html>.
43. The main text of this plaque is accompanied by a list of groups who pushed for the monument, including the Victims Group and Supporters (*Komunitas Korban dan Pendamping*) as the instigators. In addition, Komnas Perempuan and the Jakarta Provincial Government are listed as the joint bodies that funded the monument.

44. Cited in Lenny Tristia Tambun, 'DKI Dukung Pembangunan Monumen Mei 1998 di TPU Pondok Rangon'.
45. Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia*.
46. Monika Winarnita, interview with the author, Melbourne, 25 January 2021.
47. For discussion surrounding the challenges of commemorating the sexual violence in 1998 see Monika Winarnita, 'The Politics of Commemorating the May 1998 Mass Rapes', *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 45, no. 1/2 (2011): 133–64.
48. Winarnita, 'The Politics of Commemorating the May 1998 Mass Rapes'. See also Karen Strassler, 'The Gender of Transparency', in Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation and the Image-Event in Indonesia*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020), 67–91.
49. Cited in Nurbaiti, 'May 1998 Monument Hailed as "Sign of State Responsibility"'.  
50. Strassler, 'The Gender of Transparency' (2020); and Winarnita 'The Politics of Commemorating the May 1998 Mass Rapes'. See also Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan (Volunteers Team for Humanity), *Temuan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei '98* (Report of Joint Fact-Finding Team on May '98 Riots) (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).
51. Ibid.
52. Winarnita, 'The Politics of Commemorating the May 1998 Mass Rapes'.
53. 'Against Forgetting: Twenty Years of May 1998 Riots' was a symposium organised by Forum Masyarakat Indonesia di Australia (FMIA, Indonesian Community Forum in Australia) together with the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics (LLCL), Monash University, held on 19 May 2018. See 'Menolak Lupa: 20 Tahun Kerusuhan Mei 1998' (Against Forgetting: Twenty Years of May 1998 Riots), *Buset*, 27 June 2018, <https://buset-online.com/menolak-lupa-20-tahun-kerusuhan-mei-98/>. See also Monika Winarnita and Ken Setiawan, 'Chinese Indonesian Women Break the Silence of Mass Rapes in May '98', *The Conversation*, 1 June 2018, <https://theconversation.com/chinese-indonesian-women-break-the-silence-of-mass-rapes-in-may-98-97255>.
54. Jane Goodall and Christopher Lee, 'Introduction', 8–9.
55. Ibid.

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