

FRIDAY 7 JUNE TO FRIDAY 20 SEPTEMBER ———
PRESENTED BY SAMSTAG MUSEUM OF ART

A group of approximately 12 people, mostly young adults, are standing in a line on a dark stage. They are wearing traditional Indonesian attire, specifically white Korpri shirts and blue batik sarongs. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the individuals against a dark background. The overall mood is serious and formal.

Harsono

FX HARSONO: NAMA

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FX Harsono: NAMA Essay by Siuli Tan

An account of Indonesia's art history would not be complete without a consideration of the work of pioneering contemporary artist FX Harsono. With a practice spanning six decades, including some of the most tumultuous years of Indonesia's recent history, Harsono's art bears witness to his country's evolving political and cultural contexts, while remaining emphatically personal and universal in its address.

Nama (Indonesian for 'name') is the most recent iteration in a series of Harsono's works revolving around the idea of a name as a marker of identity, as well as a site of trauma, conflict, and recuperation. Through artworks that centre on the names of Chinese Indonesians – including the artist's own – Harsono addresses the history of identity and cultural erasure effected through legislation, as well as an often-occluded history of bloodshed.

A single-channel video, *Nama* opens with a solitary singer recounting the regulation of 1966, signed by President Suharto of Indonesia, requiring all Chinese Indonesians to change their names to Indonesian ones. She is then joined by a choir, and they sing out a list of names, first in Chinese, then in their Indonesian versions, followed by the meanings of the names. The entire chorus is performed like a Catholic liturgy, the conventions of which Harsono would have been familiar with, having been raised a Catholic. The somber and melancholy air of the incantation is amplified by the stark stage lighting and the choir's austere uniform, with the men dressed in white and the women in white and blue -- the mourning colours of the Indonesian Chinese community.

Born Oh Hong Boen and baptized Francis Xavier, FX Harsono adopted his name after the legislation of 1966. Harsono lived through a time when the Chinese community in Indonesia was repeatedly targeted, the first wave of violence occurring in the wake of the second World War during the struggle for Indonesian independence, when the ethnic Chinese community -- widely regarded as spies and collaborators with the Dutch -- were massacred. This was followed by the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1960s when the loyalty of the Indonesian Chinese was called into question, and thousands slaughtered in indiscriminate 'purges'. During Suharto's 'New Order' government, under the pretext of national unity and the forging of a new national identity, the use of the Chinese language was banned, and Chinese schools, press and organisations were closed down. More recently during the harrowing riots of May 1998, Chinese homes and businesses were targeted by looting mobs, with women raped and buildings razed to the ground. The history of the Chinese in Indonesia is hence, one scarred with acts of violence, enacted in all its forms, from brutal physical violence to subtler, more insidious forms effected through legislation and social stigmas; indeed, this trauma "has been stamped onto the very question of what it means to be Chinese Indonesian"¹.

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Violence and oppression were not new to Harsono: his earlier works such as *Power and the Oppressed* (1992) and *Voice Without Voice / Sign* (1993-94) were searing commentaries on how Indonesia's oppressive regime strangled civic protest and calls for democracy, often with punitive measures. [insert artwork image of *Voice without Voice*] However, the 1998 crisis and ensuing violence, in particular the targeting of the Chinese community, precipitated a shift in Harsono's artmaking. Where in the past he viewed his role as that of an artist speaking on behalf of the oppressed, the disillusionment Harsono experienced on realizing that the very people he had fought for previously were equally capable of the violence and partisanship he had formerly criticized the political regime of, gave the artist "a strong push to leave social themes behind". As Harsono reflected, "In a change like this, I try to see myself over again"², and this prompted an introspective turn in his art. Delving into his identity as a Chinese Indonesian, Harsono began to eschew the strident tenor and fervent, public address that characterized his earlier, socio-politically oriented works, in favour of more inward-looking works that centered on representations of himself, and executed in a more poetic and affective register.

The first iteration of Harsono's 'name' works marked this significant shift. *Rewriting The Erased* was first presented at Harsono's solo exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum in 2010. In a darkened room, the artist, dressed simply in white, sits at a desk and begins to write his name in Chinese characters. The piece of paper with Harsono's name is placed on the floor, and the artist repeats this gesture, until the entire floor is papered over with his Chinese name. It is a meditative and poignant performance, as Harsono seeks to reclaim an aspect of his identity and selfhood that he has had to repress throughout most of his adult life, practising a 'politics of denial' that was part and parcel of being Chinese in Indonesia. Harsono's lack of familiarity with the calligraphic brush – which he holds incorrectly – is a ... detail that prompts a consideration of how cut off Harsono – like many other Chinese Indonesians – has been from his culture. These attempts to reconnect with that culture and identity is explored further in another performance-video titled *Writing In The Rain*. Here, Harsono cuts a solitary figure once more, as he writes his name on a glass pane, the Chinese characters forming a thicket of inky black strokes that obscure his face, until a stream of water starts to run down from above, erasing all traces of Harsono's writing and washing away the ink until it pools on the ground. The water is a metaphor for forgetting, for state-sponsored policies that legislated cultural erasure and public amnesia. To date, there has been little desire to acknowledge the impact of earlier histories of violence against the Chinese community in Indonesia, but rather a desire to 'write over': at one of the major sites of the 1998 riots for instance, a new mall has been constructed, rather than a memorial³.

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It is with this in mind that we can turn to *Nama* with a better understanding of the freighted history behind Chinese Indonesian names. The choir's recitation of the original Chinese names of the individuals is a form of public address, a public declaration. This is significant because the Chinese community in Indonesia rarely used these names in public, going instead by their 'official' Indonesian names. If anything, their Chinese names were only used in private, usually amongst family members. To say these Chinese names out loud, and to commit them to paper in writing, is akin to breaking a stigma fostered by years of insidious discriminatory state policies⁴. The choir of voices chanting each name with deliberation and gravitas can thus be understood as an affirmation and public recuperation -- a step towards healing or mending that chapter of history.

In addition, names are of especial import to the Chinese. As Harsono explains, "(n)ames are given by parents as a kind of prayer attached to their child, to protect his life so he will be a dignified, respected, and happy human being". Furthermore, "Chinese names hold deep meanings, and according to Chinese beliefs a name could determine the destiny of its owner. A name is one's pride, and the name psychologically influences its owner, whose behavior and emotions are shaped by the meaning behind the name"⁵. Many Chinese also follow a naming convention, where each generation is named after a part of a family poem. As such, an enforced name change signifies an act of violence, a rupture that severs the individual from his or her lineage, parental blessings, and culture.

And yet, as the recitation of *Nama* demonstrates, there were attempts by the Chinese community to retain elements of their original names when translating these into their Indonesian ones. This covert act of resistance or 'holding on' demonstrates the same spirit of resilience and perseverance enacted by Harsono in his performance videos *Rewriting the Erased* and *Writing In The Rain*. It is also significant that the names chanted by the choir in *Nama* were taken from mass graves around Indonesia: they are the names of victims of the massacres that took place during Indonesia's post-independence struggle. With this, Harsono draws parallels between the forms of violence inflicted on the Chinese community in Indonesia – the more explicit and brutal form of physical violence, as well as its subtler, state-sponsored form of enforced cultural assimilation, the latter compounded by daily micro-aggressions which Harsono has previously likened to a thousand needling pin pricks (*'titik nyeri'*).

Just as how the solitary female chorist of *Nama* is slowly joined by several other choir members, so too an enquiry that started out as something intensely personal and individual becomes part of a larger conversation about histories of violence and the memories and experiences of a community. Harsono's earlier, solitary meditations have evolved into the collective chorus of *Nama*. In the midst of this all, a spirit of resilience prevails: as noted by Strassler, *Nama* "foregrounds the camouflaged work of repair undertaken by Chinese Indonesians...seeking to stitch a continuous thread between their old and new names, resisting the rupture that had been thrust upon them, they also refused to maintain 'Indonesian' and 'Chinese' as distinct and mutually exclusive"⁶. This bears out in the youthful faces of the choir in the video, an ethnically diverse group suggesting a different collective future. The group's blended identity is also echoed in the details of their dress, a mix of modern Western clothing and a syncretic blend of indigenous, Chinese and European influences, as seen in the women's white *kebaya* blouses and their sarongs made in the coastal *batik* style⁷. It is no coincidence that *Nama* is evocative of a Mass: a time to seek solace and strength. Furthermore, as Harsono notes, "(p)rayer in Indonesia, prayer everywhere, is usually not just spoken but also sung"⁸. Just as the *Azaan*, or call to prayer, is carried by song throughout the day in Indonesia, *Nama*'s collective mourning and commemoration is carried on the swell of voices, resonating beyond the confines of private grieving, to enfold many others within a shared affective register.

Siuli Tan

Siuli Tan is an independent curator and art consultant. She is a former Museum professional with over ten years of experience in curating, programming and commissioning contemporary art, with network spanning the Asia Pacific.

Endnotes

- 1 Philip Smith, 'Writing in the Rain: Erasure, trauma, and Chinese Indonesian identity in the recent work of FX Harsono', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, January 2015, pp. 139.
- 2 FX Harsono, 'Transisi: Pernyataan Seniman', *Displaced* (exhibition catalogue), Galeri Nasional Indonesia & Cemeti Art House, 2003, pp. 19-20.
- 3 Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 123.
- 4 Harsono describes the experience of writing and reclaiming his Chinese name as one in which he felt "healed from fear", where "(t)he burden of bearing a sense of shame and the fear to admit that I am an ethnically Chinese Indonesian who is not 'indigenous' has disappeared". Another Chinese Indonesian artist, Tintin Wulia, has also described the taboo of the Chinese name – that which is not to be mentioned and a source of shame and fear. See Karen Strassler, 'The art of repair: naming violence in the work of FX Harsono', *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 21:1, 2022, pp. 174 – 175.
- 5 FX Harsono, *Artist's Statement in Nama: FX Harsono* (exhibition catalogue), Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, 2019.
- 6 Strassler, *op. cit.*, pp. 184.
- 7 Coastal batik (batik pesisir) originated in the north coast of Java, in areas active in foreign trade. Unlike the more formal styles of royal batik found in the courts of Central Java, coastal batik readily incorporated foreign stylistic influences in its motifs and colouring, its unique syncretic style evolving from the co-existence of several cultures.
- 8 FX Harsono video interview with Smith College Museum of Art's Jane Chace Carroll Curator of Asian Art, Yao Wu, October 2022.

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FX HARSONO, *NAMA* (video still), 2019.
Image courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the artist

FX HARSONO: NAMA

SAMSTAG KUDLILA SEASON

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