

# BEYOND CULTURAL BARRIERS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHIAS ARNDT

By Ashley Crawford.



Clockwise from top left:

FX Harsono, *Writing in the rain*, 2011, DVD, 6 mins, colour, sound

Eko Nugroho, *Trap Costume for President 1*, 2011, Embroidered rayon thread on fabric backing, 180 x 156cm

Entang Wiharso, *Borderless Floating Island*, 2011-2012, graphite, resin, steel, brass, pigment, thread, 350 x 750 x 140cm

Entang Wiharso, *Interfere Reclaim Landscape*, 2012, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 202cm



The new name Arndt signals a decisive step in Matthias Arndt's 25-year career as a gallerist and cultural entrepreneur. Arndt will spend more of his time in Asia and the Pacific region as an art dealer and independent expert to artists, museums, private and corporate collections.

In addition to the advisory services, the central mission for exhibitions will be to introduce the major positions of contemporary art from the new art landscapes in China and Southeast-Asia to European audiences and vice-versa.

The ARNDT gallery on Potsdamer Straße in Berlin will continue to present shows on a regular basis, mixing emerging talents from the Asia Pacific region, internationally established artists and curatorial projects. Alongside the Berlin program, ARNDT will also stage Pop-Up-Shows in temporary, unconventional spaces around the world such as Hong Kong, Sydney, Singapore and London.

Arndt's links with Australia are now intimate. He married an Australian, Tiffany Wood, who had spent 23 years abroad working with auction houses Sotheby's and Phillips de Pury in London, New York and Berlin, and at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, with whom he has a son, August, who is three.

The 44 year-old describes himself as self-taught as a gallerist. "The only formal education I have certified is an apprenticeship in a bank I did after my baccalaureat in school. This was my concession to parental worries," he says. From there he became assistant to Jan Hoet for Documenta in 1992. Wasting little time, in 1994 he founded Arndt & Partner, which later became ARNDT.

#### **WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO ARTISTS OF THE SOUTHEAST-ASIA REGION?**

I was travelling in the region (Singapore/Indonesia) and was both intrigued and shocked: I felt so foreign, as I did not know any of the artists, nor the players in that art landscape and the artistic language seemed opposite to anything I have seen and been successfully promoting the 17 years before (Thomas Hirschhorn, Sophie Calle, Nedko Solakov, Gilbert & George and many others). Looking at works from Entang Wiharso, Eko Nugroho or Agus Suwage I first had no formal comparison, so I had almost a strong anti-reaction in that moment. This then made me curious, as my dealers instinct reminded me that whenever I reacted strongly or in opposition to a work, it was because it had something fundamental to say, to me and or about the world.

#### **DO THE ARTISTS' PRACTICES OF THIS REGION REFLECT THOSE OF THE WEST?**

FX Harsono (b. 1949 Indonesian; one of the leading figures in Indonesian conceptual art) whose survey show I just saw at the Singapore Art Museum, I could somehow relate to it as his language was familiar to me through working with a conceptual and text-related artist like Sophie Calle. Ariadhytia Pramuhendra (born 1984, Indonesian), with his black and white charcoal drawings on canvas also seemed more "readable" to me, but still he introduced his own "handwriting." But looking at Eko Nugroho (b. 1970 and one of maybe in the west most known artists from the younger Indonesian generation) and Entang Wiharso (b. 1967 Javanese/Indonesian and together with Eko Nugroho and two more artists representing Indonesia at the next Venice Biennale) I had no formal comparison - the references to the Indonesian/Javanese culture I could not read at the time. I felt in a similar "trap," as I have been when looking at major Chinese Art early on in the '90s: I thought that I could not show these great artists, as I will never fully understand the Chinese/Asian Culture. This is how I missed out on some of the major movements of my time, even though I was alerted and attracted.

Warned from this experience I thought this time I need to not insist to "understand" but just look with an open mind, ask questions and be prepared to answer questions the artworks ask me: and the works talked to me, in the Universal Language great Art communicates with beyond language and cultural barriers.

#### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT THEMES AND SUBJECTS THAT INFLUENCE THE ARTISTS?**

The art from Indonesia but also the other stunning new art landscapes in Thailand (we will show Natee Utarit, born 1970 and living and working in Bangkok and this fall in Berlin), the Philippines (Geraldine Javier, born 1970 will be in our next show in Melbourne, with a solo show planned in Berlin in 2013) Vietnam and Cambodia (in 2014 a curated survey show for art from both countries is planned for both Berlin and Australia) addresses fundamental issues these countries have: economical growth but strong imbalances between wealth and poverty and other imbalances, political, religious and other issues. When Eko Nugroho had a residency in Paris he did a work, La Rue Parle, (The Street Talks) a series of 45 embroideries in which he shows that Paris and Yogyakarta encounter similar issues of frictions between wealth and poverty and other social and religious conflicts. FX Harsono, himself Indonesian of Chinese descent, talks about how (Chinese)

in Indonesian society, Ding Q. Lé (Vietnamese, who showed with the Sherman Foundation in Sydney last year) is addressing the problem of the Boat People, Natee Utarit shows the clash between the progress of a young society in Thailand with the traditional conservative structures and powers. The artists in Southeast-Asia address fundamental issues in their art, which makes the work relevant - but they all work and resolve these questions with their own artistic means, which makes the results highly attractive as artworks.

#### **SOUTHEAST-ASIA IS EXPERIENCING A GROWING AWARENESS OF THE REST OF THE WORLD. WHERE IS THE REGION HEADING?**

Indonesia and parts of Southeast-Asia are amongst the fastest growing economies in the world - this is also due to the fact that they are highly educated, young and therefore ambitious societies. This has to have an impact on the arts and cultural life of the region. Indonesia, but also the Philippines have an incredibly strong market for their own art. It is a struggle to get my hands on a major work and make it available to the Western (US, European or Australian) art market. The (mostly private) collections in Southeast-Asia collect their artists in depth. But they also start collecting international art. Part of my decision to move to Australia with my family came from the wish to be closer to these new exciting and booming markets and art landscapes. I was surprised though that the awareness for the quality and value of Southeast-Asian, especially Indonesian, art in Australia is not more developed. Some of the museums and private collections are still predominantly looking to the West, to Great Britain and the US. This may be specifically resulting from the Commonwealth/Anglo angle. But a few museums, such as GOMA, but also the Art Gallery of South Australia, the NGA but also the Sherman Foundation, only to mention a few, look closer at the art from their direct neighbours. And more is soon to come.

#### **DO YOU THINK MANY ARTISTS OF THESE REGIONS HAVE BEEN SIMPLY OVERLOOKED, IS IT JUST A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE WORLD KNOWS THESE ARTISTS?**

Oh yes: we encounter, especially in Australia and for many reasons, a shift of interest further towards international contemporary art. Art from Southeast-Asia, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand will play a much more important role in the Australian market and art landscape soon. The energy in these countries and the creative potential is simply too strong to be ignored - and I will dedicate a big part of my contacts and energy to promote Southeast-Asian art further in Australia, but also in Europe and the US.