

## Decoding the Veils of Meaning of 'Kebaya'

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For Victoria Cattoni, being an artist who lives and works in an environment surrounded by many specific symbolic languages that are different to those of her homeland is indeed a distinct challenge. In 1998, she left her native soil of Australia to reside and work in Bali. Her encounters with the realm of culture in Indonesia have resulted in many unique ideas packed, with a deep comprehension on 'Indonesia-ness'. It should be noted that she is not one of the kinds of Western artist who is merely attracted to Eastern 'exotica'. Her works are not merely inspired by Indonesian culture, which is usually regarded as 'strange', 'mysterious' as well as 'attractive' by the non-Indonesian, but the works also offer critical questions from unusual points of view about what really happens in our daily surroundings.

Video has been one of the prominent aspects in Cattoni's works for roughly the last four years. Not only does it play a role as a media that conveys information, but also as a medium that is conceptually relevant with the idea from which her whole creative processes derive. In the work "Tamasya Kebaya" presented in this exhibition she employs video as an instrument that has the ability to represent an icon of culture, namely the 'kebaya' - which can actually be seen as a part of Indonesian people's daily life - and at the same time decode the many veils, layers and constructions of meaning behind it. The concept of kebaya is used as a doorway to enter into a further discussion of how female identity and femininity are seen today.

The work "Tamasya Kebaya" is basically a video installation that invites public interaction. The people who are present to see her work are used as performers who supposedly have to perform in front of a camera. A row of kebayas collected from several regions of Indonesia are displayed and set up to be worn by exhibition viewers, both female and male. A videotaping process records how they comment on their own appearance in front of a mirror, or other commentary that does not always directly relate with the object of the kebaya itself.<sup>1</sup> In "Tamasya Kebaya", the public engaged in the work as the participants, respondents as well as being a reliable source of information of those who come into contact with, and at the same time decode the shared values of kebaya.

Public interaction, the placing of the mirror and video camera in the "Tamasya Kebaya" installation are the most interesting visual aspects to discuss. Metaphorically, these three elements are used as the locus 'to mirror'. The way that each participant embellishes his or herself in front of the mirror reflects the distances between the meaning of the object and its users or 'consumers. Some of the comments such as "Cantik..." (Pretty..."), "Seksi..." ("Sexy...") or "...tidak bisa dijelaskan dengan kata-kata..." ("...it can't be explained with words...") show how the participants, mostly female, observe their own image while wearing the object. Such commentary could be objective on the one hand, but on the other, it actually stimulates many different interpretations on how they comprehend the meaning of kebaya in relation to the construction of female existence.

The result of the videotaping process which records different public interactions in different geographic locations is no less interesting to observe. In one of

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<sup>1</sup> This can in any case be observed in some workshops and exhibitions held by Victoria Cattoni in a number of cities in Indonesia and abroad.

Cattoni's exhibitions held in Darwin last year, she cleverly made use of footage presenting the application of kebaya in Indonesia as one of the elements in her work. What subsequently came about were comments from the Darwin participants – mostly Australians – that referred to the presented footage: a counter-commentary towards a reference on the 'original' owners and uses of kebaya. Here, Cattoni's work has become a media of an active-participatory communication. It could be observed that besides bridging two different sides of culture through kebaya on one hand, the work also ruptures the chain of significance of the object on the other, because the commentaries and interactions of the Darwin participants are different to the meanings of kebaya originating in Indonesia.

Kebaya has long been known as female dress that specifically represents the traditional culture of Indonesia. Jean Couteau, who wrote on one of Cattoni's exhibitions referred to it as an object with no 'clear origin'.<sup>2</sup> The shape of the garment, which has more or less been influenced by the crossing encounter between local traditional and Islamic cultures in Indonesia, has been adapted in various ways in many different regions. Many variances of traditional female dress have been called kebaya, be its origins from Java, Sumatra or Bali. The variances of the object have even undergone a politicisation of meaning related to the founding of 'national identity', as demonstrated in particular formal occasions of the state's high officers and the commemoration of R.A. Kartini Day, which represents the concept of women's emancipation in Indonesia. Kebaya, in this case, becomes an object and means to expose images of women that can be referred to as the most ideal model.

The mode of presentation in the "Tamasya Kebaya" installation indeed shows the most specific sample of contemporary art practice which relies on active participation of the public as the producers of meaning. Victoria Cattoni's project would not seemingly end as a 'work of art' because the work is more like a cultural research that has to be carried out continually. Besides exploring ways of decoding the veils of meaning of kebaya in relation to the construction of gender, the work "Tamasya Kebaya" can at least stimulate further discussion on how the shifting of material culture occurs in Indonesia. This is one of the main tendencies of practice created by contemporary artists when artworks have come to be considered as merely a process of artefact production.

*Translated from catalogue essay: 'Menyingkap Selubung Makna "Kebaya"' from exhibition catalogue **Membaca Kebaya**, Galeri Lontar – Jakarta, Rumah Proses – Bandung, Universitas Diponegoro – Semarang, 2003.*

*Bahasa Indonesia version available on request.*

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Couteau "The Way People Dress..." catalogue of Victoria Cattoni's exhibition and workshop "Whose Kebaya, anyway?" held at Paros Gallery, Sukawati, Bali, 20-30 April 2003.