

# Tamasya Kebaya

Krisna Murti

Enter a space somewhat resembling a fashion boutique: rows of *kebaya* in an assortment of colours and sizes, for children through to adult women. In one corner hangs a wide mirror. Close-by a tv monitor screens video documentation of Balinese models wearing the *kebaya* in a variety of poses and situations. With Victoria's guidance, visitors go through the motions of fitting themselves into the *kebaya* while facing this apparatus. A camera monitors their dressing movements simultaneously projecting them onto a wide screen.

This is the second version of a video installation performance by Victoria Cattoni, developed over the past three years, exploring clothing in Indonesia with particular reference to Bali. At a glance, it appears exotic. This however, is utilized as an initial strategy only, because as we begin to interact and experience this work, we realize that the *kebaya* is operating as a device or 'doorway' – as a point of reference for understanding the thoughts, practices and cultural dynamics contained within it. In contrast to many other foreign artists who generally seek to 'exoticize' what is new to them upon arriving in a new place, Victoria seems to represent a new generation without pretensions to authority when commenting on interpretation and meaning. In her choice of theme and mode of visual representation, production and interactive communication, we are made aware of the fact that the artist is only a small part in the process of finding and giving meaning.

Some cultural experts suggest that clothing is our social and cultural skin – like an extension of the body. When we choose particular clothing to wear, whether from a shop or our own wardrobe, we seek to reveal our identity. The matter becomes more complex however, when external factors force non-negotiable choices on the individual. This may be due to political power, religious orientation and socio-cultural constructs. Individuality and collectivity are two factors constantly searching for a balance. The difficulty arises when a body – through its cultural skin – is given meanings that are in conflict from that which the body itself desires. In text, commentary and practice Victoria reminds us that the *kebaya* has undergone such a process of construction in its functions as the national costume, ceremonial blouse, daily wear and fashion item. Beginning from this point, the *kebaya* is taken up to be read and examined in relation to definitions of femininity within Indonesia as well as within its accompanying trans-cultural contexts.

Broadly speaking, there are two targets of cultural communication that underlie Victoria's work. The first is the interaction with the public who are close to the *kebaya* in a geographic and cultural sense – those who wear the *kebaya* on a regular basis – in short, the Balinese, Javanese and other ethnic groups who see themselves as the 'cultural owners' of the garment. The second target group (which can include the first target group) is the public or audience who are then invited to enter into dialogue with the *kebaya* both verbally and practically – being given an actual opportunity to try one on, see how it fits etc. This strategy presents an alternative, and perhaps more sympathetic means of situating the audience as active subjects. Given this approach, the participant/viewer may come to the realisation that certain aspects of the *kebaya* – such as the low, open-cut of the neckline, the close-fitting design, the fabric of transparent lace brocade – do not automatically imply sensuality. Nor should they be understood simply as defining a social construction that positions women as beautiful creatures by virtue of their sensuality. Through the doorway of the *kebaya* we can begin to broach the following subjects: the roles and positions of women within the domestic setting and the workplace; the myths and the realities surrounding womanhood; interpretations of gender and respect for gender difference; the

negotiation between cultural identity and religious observation and so on. Perhaps what we can uncover together through the process of this participatory video installation, is the fact of the variability of our individual and personal responses.

The other interesting aspect of this work on the *kebaya* is that it avoids the trap of using culture as artifact and the subjects as case studies. This can be seen in the way that Victoria positions her work in different cultural contexts and locations. In Darwin - or wherever else outside of Indonesia - the collection of dozens of these pre-worn - second hand and borrowed - *kebaya* are offered to the public to try on. The experience of dressing in these *kebaya* - of trying on clothing which has its own personal memories and histories - directs the participant towards assuming another identity or imagining 'belonging' to a specific ethnic group; it may inspire the participant to behave in a particular way. This is an empathetic strategy inviting the participants to discuss - from different angles - their understanding of and views on 'femininity' as conceptualised through notions of femininity contained in a different cultural code. This is a work full of initiative towards the mutual understanding and challenges of cultural diversity, including that of the 'feminine' within human civilisation.

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English version by James Bennett & Victoria Cattoni, 2002  
Original Bahasa Indonesia version available upon request

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