

*Un-Abject the Local Genius: A Philosophical Research on Local Art Sustainability  
in Indonesian Contemporary Era*

Ikhaputri Widiyanti, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This study is focused on how local genius sustain their particularity in the dynamic wave of contemporary art. I will compare two local art spaces in Yogyakarta and Bandung while analyzing their differences in defining a sustain local genius. The understanding of Indonesia's contemporary art creation mostly dominated by capital minded. Therefore, most of the artist will put more effort to be acknowledge as a capital artist. Sometimes, either the capital artist or the local artist will treat some local elements as fashion for the sake of popularity, without gaining any value from the art. By the end, local artist which not succeed to follow the pattern of urban culture will be abjected with her/ his creation. The chance of extinction rises if trends are not followed by the meaning of local culture. Moreover, the local artist will lose their authenticity, only to survive by being order based artist. Most of my theory will used the abject theory from Julia Kristeva along with an interpretation of Bagong Kussudiardja's philosophy of creation as the aesthetic of (im)possible. I spotlight the needs of acknowledge of appreciation on local genius. Therefore, I would like to initiate philosophical recognition to un-abject local geniuses in the polemic of gaining meaning in contemporary art in Indonesia.

Keywords: Abject; Art; Indonesia; Local Genius; Contemporary

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

Art creativity is an inseparable theme in the discussion of art and aesthetic philosophy. Allusion to the world of creation, imagination and creation inside the artist's mind will represent the ideal world with some reality limitation. Plato (427—347 B.C.E) illustrated in his cave man allegory about the difficultness to express one's understanding of ideal world. Ideas couldn't be shared easily for there will be limitation to communicate, as a form of our limited knowledge possessed. Likewise, with the realization of art creativity, they move unrestrained in the space of creation but determined as the artist deliver their work of art. This will be a challenge for the artist to be dependent in their authenticity. As Plato puts in *Timaeus* (2000), it will all depend on how the interval forms of creativity formed. (48e).

Based on the definition of the space creation, I try to explore more on the creation process by Indonesian local artists who own their philosophy of creation. This study will be an analysis that emerged from the main research that had been held in mid 2017. I've been part of a research conducted by Dr. Embun Kenyowati from Universitas Indonesia, entitled "Rethinking Genius in Contemporary Art Creation, A Philosophical Study on Its Relation to Contingency and Temporary Art Object"<sup>1</sup>. The following research aims to find answers to the concept of genius in contemporary art. Then, I took my liberty to analyze the problems of local genius and their art creation process. This idea comes when I met a young painter in Jelekong Cultural Village in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. In the observation section, I will specifically discuss about Jelekong Cultural Village. I will draw a new understanding that highlights especially on the process recognition the local artists and their art creation.

At the beginning of my research, I found differences between establish artists and new or unknown artists. They are distinguished by their art work recognition and how they influenced the development of Indonesian art. The establish artists won't have any social determination to define their artistic style. They will independently focus on the problem of ideal creation to develop their skills, style, and characteristic for their art work. They've establish a great name as selling points and allows them to live fully on their art creation. Even some of them create their personal galleries that can support their lives and also their families. Furthermore, they also influence other artist and the development of Indonesian art. Some of these personal galleries enrich the documentation of Indonesian art history, such as Museum Affandi (Figure 1) in Yogyakarta, Jehan's Gallery in Bandung (Figure 2), and Nuart Sculpture Park in Bandung (Figure 3).

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia-Pacific Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (APRISH 2017), Depok, Indonesia, 27—29 September 2017.



Figure 1: Inside the main building of Museum Affandi, Yogyakarta  
Source: personal documentation

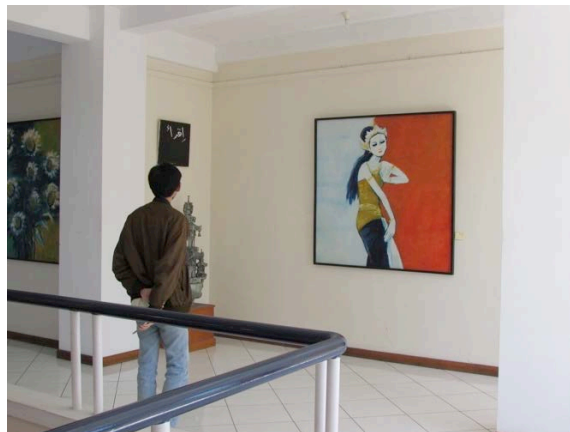


Figure 2: Inside the Jeihan's Gallery in Bandung  
Source: personal documentation



Figure 3: Putiaso by Nyoman Nuarta (2015) in Nuart Sculpture Park, Bandung.  
Source: personal documentation

On the other side, new artist or infamous artists—who doesn't yet recognize by public—will tend to gain difficulties to process their creation independently. Their interpretation on establish their art work characteristic will limited by the need to survive in life. They also often choose to accept orders or doing other job beside doing art. It will be very difficult for them to sell their art work with a high price due to their infamous position. They couldn't survive the competition compared with the establish artist in the arena of national art. I will analyze moreover on the subject related to the artisan in Jelekong Cultural Village.

The outline of this study will base on the questions about the impossible situation for the artists to be fully independent proceed their idea due to the limitation that surround them. It is a philosophical question on abjection as an approach to acknowledge one's process of art creation. To answer the question, first I will try to describe how the artists be abject by their own creation. How can we recognize the process of creation? Those questions will lead us to the ground question of this study about un-abject the local genius and the need of aesthetic of (im)possible.

### Theoretic Approach

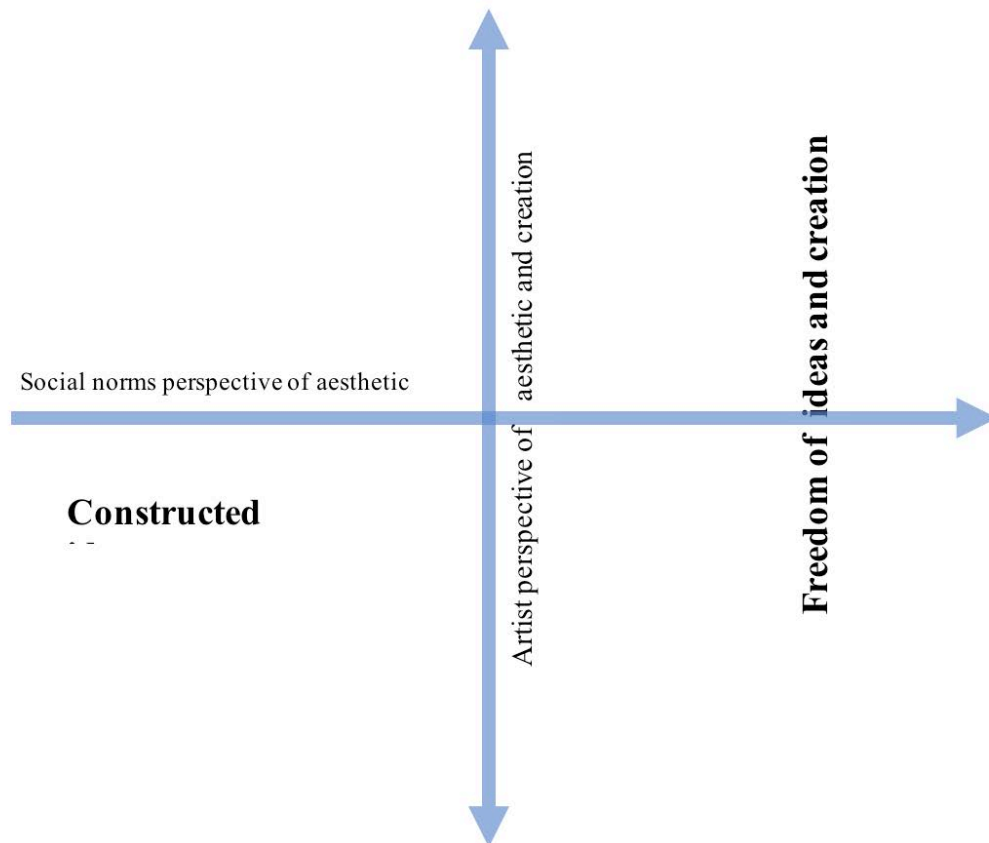


Figure 4: Synchronic and Diachronic chart of art creation

In this study, I interpreted a chart (Figure 4) which depart from the perspective that influences the development from the artist's artistic creation. Influenced by the theory of synchronic and diachronic from Ferdinand de Saussure (1857—1913), I draw an understanding of identity persistence from the artist's creation process. The vertical and horizontal position described in Figure 4 describe a meeting between synchronic and diachronic understanding. Both of them can't stand independently for a mutual relation-influence reason. They are generated simultaneously—often confusing in placing the origin of knowledge. (Saussure, 1959, 213).

The art creation process which illustrated as the horizontal path in Figure 4 is a representation of synchronic understanding that is formed within the aesthetic norms of society. This formation will construct the artist's idea inside her consciousness that has been establish inside artist's way of knowledge. While the illustrated vertical path

represents the process from one's knowledge understanding which is not bound in a system—in Saussure's understanding we called it a diachronic relation (Saussure, 1959, 212). In the process of art creation, artist should have the authenticity and independent of practice.

Either the synchronic or diachronic approaches can't be separated as they work simultaneously inside the artist's space and time. Each will affect other's process of understanding. The artist's diachronic space can't be separated from the structure she learned in society. The diachronic approach involves knowledge origin and development which acquired by the individual (Saussure, 1959, 181). Nevertheless, unlike Saussure, I don't emphasize the approach on the synchronic path because the form of system construction will inhibit the freedom of expression. We need both of the approaches by underlining the creation process from the diachronic approach. By the end, we have to give more attention to the artist's artistic process, not only on the value of their final art work.

Imbalance approach on the synchronic relation will bring up issues which will be inherently problematic in the artist's idea. She will experience an estrangement that comes from herself. There is a thin line between the desire of creating and order in society. This thin line creates a simultaneous situation of sublimation and abjection in the process of creation (Arya, 2014, 4). Moreover in this study, I will use the abject theory from Julia Kristeva (1941— ) derived from *Power of Horror* (1982) to define the abject indicator. The abjection theory will reinforce the diachronic approach in the Figure 4 to enable an unknown aesthetic process in the society aesthetic system.

### **Observation: Padepokan Bagong and Jelekong Cultural Vilage**

In this study, I will use the method of literature analysis using the theory of abjection and aesthetic of creation. I will combine it with phenomenology method which started by observation on two art space: Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja in Yogyakarta and Jelekong Cultural Village in Bandung—both are located in Indonesia. Standpoint on philosophical and ontological-aesthetic will enrich the methodology in this study. This philosophical standpoint will bring us to the understanding of artistic creation and artist subjectivity as part of their identity.

In my observation, I notice that Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja and Jelekong Cultural Village are suit for explaining the diachronic relation. Both of this art space has uniqueness in developing their process creation. Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja located in Bantul, about 10 km from the center of Yogyakarta. Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja was founded by Bagong Kussudiardja (1928—2004), a painter and choreographer, on October 2, 1978 as a non-formal art education institution which includes dance performing, *karawitan*, theatre, *ketoprak*, music, and many other art activities. Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja currently managed by the Bagong Kussudiardja Foundation. Many art community work together with Padepokan Bagong such as Sanggar Kuaetnika, Sinten Remen Orkes, Banter Banget Orchestra and Teater Gandrik. Since 2009, Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja held event called *Jagongan Wagen*, as an art performance which is held every month and open to public without admission. The purpose of Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja is to bring artist and community to learn art for contributing a humanity aspect in society. Bagong Kussudiardja believes that art should has a contribution on

developing ideas, ideals and values of human life. There are many programs held for artists and art community to encourage artistic life that can contribute to develop many ideas and values for the society.



Figure 5. Inside the Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja  
Source: personal documentation



Figure 6. Sculpture of Bagong Kussudiardja  
Source: personal documentation

There is a different perspective on the next observation. Jelekong Cultural Village, located in Bandung is famous for handcrafts such as *wayang golek* and painting. The difference with Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja, in Jelekong Cultural Village is not centralized in one art space building. There are many art galleries and art spaces scattered around this village. Unfortunately, as they were named by the government, there is no adequate facilities support the artisan in Jelekong Cultural Village.

Jelekong Cultural Village began their artistic activities since the 1960s. Painting became a hereditary tradition. But unfortunately, they couldn't define as pure artistic activities, thus the industrialization of the paintings. The paintings which generally produced in Jelekong Cultural Village are mass paintings. The purpose is to meet the economic needs. The paintings industry was started by Odin Rohidin who learned painting by autodidact and sell it to the gallery. Following the success of Odin Rohidin, the people of Jelekong began to learn painting from Odin and started the painting market in Jelekong Cultural Village.



Figure 7. Jelekong Cultural Village  
Source: personal documentation

Most of the painting subject in Jelekong Cultural Village are nature landscape, animals, and everyday life activities. Although they learn autodidact, they managed to develop their techniques in diversity. One of the technique is using flip-flop as a brush substitute.



Figure 8. Painting in Jelekong Cultural Village  
Source: personal documentation



Figure 9. Jelekong Cultural Village artisan  
Source: personal documentation

Jelekong Cultural Village's artists generally regard their artistic activities as economic work. Many of the artists paint by order. Beside taking order from other region from Bandung, they also took bulk orders from other countries, outside Indonesia. The price of painting in Jelekong Cultural Village is very variative, but generally it can be categorized as cheap. As a comparison, the same painting from Jelekong Cultural Village will be three time more expensive when we buy it in Braga (a place near central of Bandung). This is why the artists in Jelekong Cultural Village find it difficult to put themselves as artists because they have lost aesthetic meaning in their creation process.

### **Abject Theory In Art Creation**

Abject comes from the word *abicerere* which means 'to throw away' (Arya, 2014, 3). Abjection is a complex theory with a pervasive cultural code. Julia Kristeva in *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) notes that abjection is a vital and determinative process in the formation of subject. We need to understand the experience of the subject in terms to understand how abject become both endangers and also protect the individual. There will be boundaries of the subject that reminds us about the social norms. Kristeva notice that abjection will affects all aspects of social and cultural life.

Related to art creation in contemporary art, Rosalind Krauss argue that we have to see abject as a process that situated and have been echoed by others (Krauss, 1996, 91). It can be extended beyond art practice. Abject itself is the process, meanwhile abjection is the condition that has been experienced by subject. Abjection then refers to an impulse to reject that which disturbs or threatens the stability of subject.



Kristeva argue that the operation to abject is fundamental to maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formation. The inability to separate entirely the abject from the self, contributes a complex relationship. It is indicated by the emotions that invokes in us. We are both repelled by the abject as fear and yet has a desire (attracted) (Kristeva, 1982, 1). The thin line between abject and sublime have dramatic consequences for the stability of identity and order. While the sublime will inspire subject, the abject will put fear and suffer for the subject. But it will still concern as an aesthetic value despite the artistic suffering that surrounds the process.

Fear of the other is central to abjection. The fear of other may not be understood by the society where the subject live. But as the subject experience abject, the other will represent a threat, in an unconscious way. The problem of abjection and art creation lies in the social abject. When subject start to experience the social abject, she will follow the rules that legitimized by the society. This situation come along in the synchronic approach that constructed ideas inside the mind of subject. Related to art creation, fear that arise from the social abject will put unconscious boundaries and repressed the desire of creation.

### **Understanding the Aesthetic of (Im)possible**

Based on the understanding of social abject, we will find that there is void desire. They are not allowed to exist in one's consciousness. The synchronic approach will legitimize a system that will made the desire become the non-existent (void). In the context of this study, the artists in Jelekong Cultural Village allure with the artistic desire that become impossible to be define.

Kristeva influenced by Georges Bataille (1897—1962) from his writing, *L'impossible* in 1947. There is an interesting idea that related to the abjectv theory. Bataille argues that every writing could deploy the extreme tension between sense and nonsense (Bataille, 2001). Subjectivity becomes a problematic part to confront their fear of things that hasn't exist yet. This void understanding helps us to acknowledge the aesthetic of (im)possible. As the void became real, the artist could gain possibility beside the conscious choices that have been constructed by society. As the interpretation of creation can come in various ways, the aesthetic of (im)possible will be limitless to the artist's artistic creation process.

### **Un-Abject the Local Artist: Acknowledge and Empowerment**

Aesthetic of (im)possible is not a way to escape from the abject condition. For abject is a "void" situation that has many interpretation and possibility. First, we should remember that abject and abjection are things that will always be along with subject. It's the only possible thing that can happen to subject. The normative aesthetic will put aside the subject personal experience.

Bagong Kussudiardja developed an artistic creation process that became his philosophy. He puts the importance of creativity and productivity (Admadipurwa, 2007, 25). Bagong's philosophy of creation lies in the "*rasa*" (sense). Although Bagong also prioritizes the artwork to be real, he never measures the process in the right-wrong category. Bagong stretch the communication in the artistic creation

process as a diachronic understanding, based on the subjectivity of the artist. Three important points that he then pointed out are: to sense yourself, to sense the presence of others, and to sense the condition of society (Admadipurwa, 2007, 30).

The artist's subjectivity emphasized by Bagong not selfish way. He presupposes a sacrifice of the artist to have a will gaining a deep understanding, including the pain and suffering present in the relationship with others. The purpose of this approach is to develop the artist's awareness around her. Every experience becomes a valuable thing and we should always share with others and the society.

From the awareness of the relationship with self and others, Bagong creates a padepokan as one of the art spaces that have much influence on many artists. This space is created based on the philosophy that he holds that the body must always practice to have experiences, because even in improvising, one's must be familiar with the process of creation. The art process requires space to free the body and mind of the artist from social abject.

Some works of Bagong Kussudiardja dance that depart from the philosophy of his art creations are Yamong Dance (Figure 10) and Merak Dance. Yamong dance is a choreography created in 1975 to celebrate the anniversary of Jakarta. Bagong is not a from Jakarta, but he is capable of creating dances that are often misunderstood as Betawi traditional dance. The process of creating Yamong Dance comes from an inspiration combining traditional Javanese dance with modern dance. Bagong also sense the Betawi culture which later became the soul in the choreography. In Merak dance, Bagong made a deep observation of the peacock movement. The dancers must be able to sense their own gestures before imitating the peacock movement. This is the abject process passed by Bagong and his dancers. They succeeded in making the condition of the abjection as an empowerment of their subjectivity.



Figure 10: Tari Yamong  
Source: Galeri Indonesia Kaya

I took the concept from Bagong Kussudiardja's philosophy to analyze the situation of the young artists of Jelekong Cultural Village. One of the young artist I met was Santi. Basically, Santi has a talent in painting. She still has a desire in creating art. However, due to the economic needs and social neglect of the importance of

subjectivity in the art creation process make Santi and many young Jelekong Cultural Village's artists trapped in the social abject. Jelekong Cultural Village's artist must create an art space that is not limited in the synchronic system—in the context of Jelekong Cultural Village was related to hereditary knowledge of becoming industrial painter. The Jelekong Cultural Village's artists are still trapped between social abject and self-abject. To be able to ignore the social abject, it is necessary to gain acknowledge from the society that supports the art creation process of the Jelekong Cultural Village's artists. In addition to the acknowledgement approach, we need to create an empowerment program for the artist so they could start to sense their own desire in art creation process. This is the sense from the philosophy of Bagong Kussudiardja that we can use as a basis for understanding the aesthetic of (im)possible. Both the artists at Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja and the Jelekong Cultural Village's artists have the same opportunity to be acknowledged and independently proceed to understand their ideas and artwork. Therefore, we will highlight the importance of using the diachronic approach that frees the subjectivity of local artists as part of the developing the meaning in Indonesian contemporary art.



Figure 11. Santi from Jelekong Cultural Village and her painting  
Source: personal documentation

## Conclusion

Discussing artwork will culminate into two approaches between the artist and the audience. In the artist's position, artwork will be part of the implementation of her creation idea, even allowing to gain her subjectivity. Apart from the artist, the work becomes an object enjoyed by the body outside the artist. Audience will alternately put subjectivity as an effort to interpret the artwork. There is a tendency to place the work as a mere object. This situation even further can make the value problem as the

determinant factor of art creations developed in the society. We need is to recognize the existence of the artist and her art creation.

As an effort to recognize the existence of local genius in the development of Indonesia contemporary art, this study is especially standing on the side of the artist's artistic creation process. Society has a tendency to exclude the artist's personal experiences of artists and it will start the social abject problem. Abjection is basically needed to balance the process of art creations. The meeting between society aesthetic value and the artist's aesthetic (im)possible puts a thin boundary between abjection and sublimation. We should redefine suffering which usually attached to abject estrangement. This will help the artist to experience the creative process. This is necessary to achieve freedom of creation and ideas in art.

This paper shows that we should no longer separate binaries from the identity of an artist. This abject situation is basically experienced by every individual in the process of creation. Whether as an establish artist or infamous one. It is necessary to pay more attention to the authentic from individual historical experience. Aesthetics that were originally voided would become a diachronic approach in our aesthetic understanding. It is a logical consequence of the artist's journey between abjection and sublimation.

Artists in Jelekong Cultural Village need recognition and empowerment to be able to interpret their art process independently. We also need to understand the philosophy of creation by Bagong Kussudiardja. In line with his philosophy, Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardja has demonstrated a diachronic approach that frees their artists to be creative. By giving space and acknowledgment to every artists, the value of art will not limit only to the final work, but on the process of creation—as a recognition to the aesthetic of (im)possible. Therefore, they can contribute to the development of Indonesian contemporary art.

## References

- Admadipurwa, Purwadmadi. (2007). *Joget mBagong, di sebalik tarian Bagong Kussudiardja*. Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bagong Kussudiardja.
- Arya, Rina. (2014). *Abjection and Representation, an Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bataille, Georges. (2001). *Impossible*. City Lights Publishers.
- Krauss, Rosalind. (1996). “‘Informe’ without Conclusion’, *October*, 78, page 89-105.
- Kristeva, Julia. (1982). *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translate by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Plato. (2000). *Timaeus*, translate by Donald J. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics* translate by Wade Baskin, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. New York: Philosophical Library.

## Resources

Tari Yamong at Galeri Indonesia Kaya: <https://www.indonesiakaya.com/kanal/foto-detail/tari-yamong-tari-kontemporer-dari-jakarta>

**Contact email:** ikhaputri.w@gmail.com