

ROH

WATER RESISTANCE

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Ade Darmawan's new works further his research on the practice of distillation. As a variant of extraction, purifying a substance in its liquid phase, distillation in a sense is an essentialisation. For a long time – in a European genealogy of modernity – purifying, essentialising, distilling and extracting were considered fundamental to the production of culture, if we were to define culture as an adaptation of natural resources toward human ends. "It's the art of the process make each distillery's products a work of art all its own" is a sentence not coincidentally used to describe the distilling process for liquors as an art. Of course it refers to a usage of the term 'art' as a form of 'making' stressing the process over the result; the modification and manipulation of the raw material – the art – create a history of production, though the product cannot expose that history by itself as it has become abstracted from it once it circulates in our everyday use or has reached the market.

Darmawan's installation encompasses both process and product, neither of which is above politics. Poignantly he creates a dispositive to stage this paradigm of a specific cultural history which was enforced on the world and is highly problematic. His installation unpicks the thinking behind colonialism which often used monotheistic theology

to embark on a disenchantment of the world and legitimise conquest, and the desire to control nature and the (indigenous) people living in and with the world. 'Terraformed' to meet the coloniser's needs, nature and people were subjected to conjoined processes of physical and intellectual violence, required as Amitav Gosh describes "for the emergence of a new economy based on extracting resources from a desacralized inanimate Earth." Stemming from an ideology of conquest, he conception of the Earth as an inert entity would become a basic doctrine of 'official modernity', eradicating all forms of animism as delusion or primitive superstition.

The works in the exhibition result from a research Darmawan started a couple of years ago, after reading Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Arus Balik*, narrating the implication of histories and politics in processes of colonisation and shifts in maritime power in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century for people and ports across the regions then called 'below' (the Straits of Malacca, South China Sea, Java Sea, and further east) and 'above' (the Indian Ocean and further west) the wind. As a starting point for his installation, Ade Darmawan carefully studied *Arus Balik* with a special attention for how different characters in the book use natural resources. Later, he undertook several field trips to the city of Tuban, a city in East Java which plays a central role in the book, and to the nearby town of Bojonegoro, a major producer of teakwood and tobacco, which more recently became known as the location of the discovery of the biggest oil reserve in Indonesia. Both cities are not far from Blora, the birthplace of Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Darmawan created an installation with laboratory equipment, a version of which is also on view in the actual exhibition. He gathered different materials such as soil, spices, and plants to transform them through distillation processes using alkaline water from the water of the archipelagic region; for example, pala (nutmeg), fundamental for its preservation qualities during long sea travel; cendana (sandalwood); kayu

manis (cinnamon); lada (pepper); kemiri (candlenut); daun cengkeh (clover leaf); daun sirih (betel leaf); daun nipah (attap palm); daun kelapa (coconut leaf); or the healing daun tapak liman (*Elephantopus scaber Linn.* in Latin). Tapak liman was used in traditional medicine for cancer treatment or as an aphrodisiac. Darmawan's laboratory setting is a reminder that the scramble for the control of the archipelago and the sea passages, was about the extraction of ore and goods in a tightly knit network of trade relations. He draws connections between the colonial *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system), a Dutch government policy for its colonies in the mid-19th century that required a portion of agricultural production to be devoted to export crops—referred to by Indonesian historians as *Tanam Paksa* [enforcement planting]—and Suharto's New Order regime (1965–1998) in Indonesia, by placing his distilling laboratory on books about the regime's policies on land and resources. The laboratory devices are leaking their purified liquids on books about Suharto's New Order regime's schemes, that are slowly eroded during the course of the exhibition.

The literal translation of *Arus Balik* from Bahasa Indonesia would be "the reversal of the tide", referring to the reversal of Java's position in the world in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, from actively sailing out to remaining inactive and receiving others – colonisers. According to scholar John Roosa, "arus balik" is "a current, particularly a current of water, that turns back and heads in the other direction."<sup>1</sup> But Pramoedya Ananta Toer's reversal of the current also involves another reversal, a meta-geographical impulse that is comparable to the notion of the "inverted telescope" that Benedict Anderson advances in his seminal book *The Spectre of Comparisons*. The promise of another reversal is implicit. In a new series of AI text-to-image generated photographs Darmawan creates images of colonial history that never existed, a gaze directed from textual description, as another way to re-enact the violent past through images as a form of self-subversion. Our crisis, Darmawan affirms in these images, which seem plausible but carry a whiff

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<sup>1</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Port of Tuban*, first chapter of *Arus Balik*, Pramoedya's Novel of Java's Lost Maritime Empire, trans. John Roosa, *Emergences* 10, no. 2 (2000): 282.

of absurdity, is ultimately the result of a mechanistic view of the earth, where nature exists only as a resource for humans to use for our own ends, rather than a force of its own, full of agency and meaning. This crisis comes with the cultural conundrum we are faced with: the challenge how to think about and work through the profound links between art-making and extractivism. Darmawan's distillation factory reminds us that art in its very techniques uses extraction and distillation, to transform agents of an ecosystem into 'resources' entering what in language would be cynically called another 'life cycle' subjected to processes and tasked with new functions. The newer works in the exhibition tackle this industrialisation of extraction, literally connecting it to the dependence on fossil fuels by using petrol barrels and elements of car motors. Indeed, creating multiple similar ominous distilling machines refers to mass production, the mechanisation of the process, an extra layer of desacralisation is added to Darmawan's distillation factory brutally contrasting with the elegant installation of alembics and books. In their bulky and baleful matter-of-fact presence, the newer works sap the possible suggestions of magic and mystery which could still be conjured up by the process of distillation.

ADE DARMAWAN

B. 1974, Jakarta, Indonesia  
Lives and works in Jakarta, Indonesia

Ade Darmawan lives and works in Jakarta as an artist, curator and director of ruangrupa. Darmawan's work deals with Indonesia, its history and its people, with a particular focus on minor histories that may seem irrelevant but are intrinsic to the DNA of the communities addressed. His presentation of these narratives assumes multiple forms, ranging from installation, objects, drawing, digital print, and video.

Darmawan studied at Indonesia Art Institute (ISI) in the Graphic Arts Department. In 1998, a year after his first solo exhibition at the Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery, Yogyakarta (now Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society), he stayed in Amsterdam to attend a two-year residency at the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten.

Darmawan has shown widely as an artist in various notable institutions around the globe. Recent solo exhibitions include *Doing Business with the Dutch* at Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2018) and *Magic Centre*, held both at Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (2015) and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands (2016). Selected group exhibitions include Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale: *After Rain*, Saudi Arabia (2024), *Indonesia Bertutur* at Borobudur, Indonesia (2022), *On the Nature of Botanical Gardens* at Framer Framed, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2020), Singapore Biennale: *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore (2016), Gwangju Biennale: *The Eight Climate (What Does Art Do?)*, Gwangju, South Korea, Korea (2016), and *The KUDA: The Untold Story of Indonesian Underground Music in the 70's* with ruangrupa at Asia Pacific Triennale, Brisbane, Australia (2012).

As a curator, he has contributed to *Riverscapes IN FLUX* at Goethe Institute Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam (2012), *Media Art Kitchen* (2013), *Condition Report*

(2016), and *6th Asian Art Biennale: Negotiating the Future* in Taiwan (2017-18). From 2006-09, he was a member of the Jakarta Arts Council, which led to his appointment as artistic director of Jakarta Biennale in 2009. He was the executive director of Jakarta Biennale during its 2013, 2015 and 2017 iterations. From early 2019-2022, with ruangrupa, he was part of the artistic team of *documenta fifteen* that took place in Kassel, Germany, 2022.

PHILIPPE PIROTTE

B. 1972, Antwerp, Belgium

Philippe Pirotte, co-Artistic Director of the upcoming Busan Biennale in South Korea (2024), also serves as Adjunct Senior Curator at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA). He is affiliated with the Städelschule Frankfurt as Professor of Art History and Curatorial Studies. He was member of the Documenta-Commission (2019-2022), which selected ruangrupa as the artistic direction of *documenta fifteen* (2022). Most recently he curated the monographic exhibition of Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo for the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht (2022), and he is preparing the major group exhibition *Spectres of Bandung* for a conglomerate of institutions in Amsterdam in 2025. In this context he convened the series of online roundtables *The Color Curtain and the Promise of Bandung* (2021), focusing on cultural and artistic developments in relation to the 1955 *Asia-Africa Conference* in Bandung, Indonesia, and he participated in the forum *Curating after Documenta 15* and *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being* during *Semana Budaya*, Jakarta in 2023.

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