

Socially Responsive Performance Art: The History and Context of Selected Performance Art in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Malaysian artists have been using performance art as an artistic medium. Nevertheless, the history and context of performance art in Malaysia have not been examined in the context of Malaysian art history in particular. Coming from the fine arts background, artists such as Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, Aisyah Baharuddin, Rahmat Haron, Azizan Rahman Paiman, Mislina Mustaffa, and Fared Ayam, are among Malaysian artists who have been producing performance art as their main artistic medium. These performances, as will be discussed in this article, are what we define as “socially responsive medium” as these performances are not only ways for artists to express themselves but most importantly, the performances were inspired and executed as a form of artistic assertion or response in regard to various issues happening that triggered or inspired these artists to react via the execution of these performances. To give a better historical context and background, this article will first elucidate and delineate the historical development of performance art within the larger visual arts practice in Malaysia before focussing on the examination of selected performances by the few artists that this article argues as being “socially responsive.” This section will focus the term used and the nature of the performances itself.

Keywords: *performance art in Malaysia, socially responsive art, Malaysian art, socially engaged art*

INTRODUCTION

On 16 August 2016, a performance art was conducted by Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, and Aisyah Baharuddin during the *Puncak Purnama* (Lunar Peak) protest gathering in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia Design Archive 2016, 00:00–02:20). The performance entitled *Lepas Tangan* (Let Go) in 2016 started off with the artists holding one another’s arms, gradually increasing their grips until they were hurting each other (Malaysia Design Archive 2016, 00:21–00:41). The audience were also involved as the artists were seen to draw energy from the audience who joined the chain of gripping hands resulting in the reaction and counter reaction of people pushing and pulling one another (Malaysia Design Archive 2016, 00:42–02:20). The performance can be interpreted as a human chain reaction of love and pain, tearing one another apart but within the effort of keeping the chained human together.

What is significant with this *Puncak Purnama* performance as describe in the earlier part of this article? What is the context of Malaysian art that makes the study of performance art as discussed by this article important? It must be noted that performance art by Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, and Aisyah Baharuddin were executed as part of the protest gathering in reaction to the demolition of *Puncak Purnama* or the Lunar Peaks public sculpture. *Puncak Purnama* was built by the late national laureate, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal (1929–2011), using ceramic glass in the shape of two acute triangles facing each other. The sculpture, commissioned by the United Malayan Banking Corporation Finance in 1986, was handed over to Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) in November 1986, to be demolished on 2 July 2016, 30 years later—as part of DBKL’s effort in rejuvenating the landscape of the area.

Lepas Tangan (Figure 1) by Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, and Aisyah Baharuddin, as described earlier were the few among many reactions of Malaysian artists as part of reactions and protests by local artists and other art activists. *Lepas Tangan*, exemplifies the “socially responsive” approach that this article will further examine and contextualise. Deriving from this example, this article focuses on selected performances produced within the context of visual arts studies or (visual) art history in Malaysia. We will firstly, briefly trace the historical development of performance produced by Malaysian visual artists as an overview of the history of performance art. Based on this overview, we will further discuss several works that were seen as having a pertinent inclination or intent as being “socially responsive.” This article will explore and suggest how these “socially responsive” performance art has become a medium for the artists to respond to an event, idea, feelings, etc. through possible lens of analysis that will be discussed later. These could be seen in the works of Intan Rafiza, Aisyah Baharuddin, Sharon Chin, Azizan Rahman Paiman, Fared Ayam, Rahmat Haron, and Mislina Mustaffa. As exemplified earlier through *Lepas Tangan*, in which the performance became an outlet or medium for artists to express and react to what is happening to Puncak Purnama, we will discuss various performance art that falls under this similar approach.

The materials gathered for this research are through photography, YouTube videos, written materials, and interviews. Although we did not witness most of these performances live and have only seen fleeting video documentation of it, the “evidence” of such artworks are mostly available to us through representations of the event such as photographs, posters, videos/YouTube videos, blogs, and through attending series of talks by the performance artists. It must be noted that the reliance on mediated documents and records does not mean that the research is flawed. Jones (1998, 10) for example, prefers to examine such art via their mediated presentation. She argues that these mediated presentation is just as valid as watching the live performance itself. She adds further that these mediated presence can actually be considered to be more pertinent as it allows audience (and researchers) to think about the performance outside of the intense moment of watching these live events. Similar to Jones, our strategic readings of the selected performances are meant to highlight specific aspects of these postmodern subjectivity or the perception or experience and the influence of personal beliefs or feelings of these performances through possible lens of analysis.



Figure 1 *Lepas Tangan* performance by Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, and Aisyah Baharuddin, 19 August 2016.
Source: Photo courtesy of Azreen Madzlan.

This article intends to offer analysis of these performance art. Although the context of postmodernity in the arts have been extensively deliberate by Sarena (2018) in her study of postmodern art in Malaysia, a study on performance art within the context of fine arts practice are very limited. As such, this article in its discussion of performance art practice can be seen as extension of Sarena's major readings Malaysian art as these performances expand and explores the subject matter and/or issues of race, class, gender, society even economy.

THE BRIEF CONTEXT AND HISTORY OF PERFORMANCE ART IN MALAYSIA

What is performance art? Goldberg who had written extensively on performance art upholds his definition of performance art as open-ended (1979), as it is live art by artists (2004, 12). Even in the United Kingdom, Live Art is another popular term to denote performance art.

The Live Art Development Agency (2009) defined Live Art as:

...where visual artists, in a rejection of objects and markets, turned to their body as the site and material of their practice, and by multiple generations of artists who broke the traditions and expectations of theatre and dance.

Now, it incorporates a huge range of practitioners, from those working at the edges of theatre, dance, film, and video, to performance writing, socio-political activism and the new languages of the digital age.

As such, performance art is essentially a multidisciplinary art as it also sometimes combines practices from other art forms, blurring the barriers between disciplines which can be seen as interspersed and overlapping with various other art fields such as poetry, literature, music, drama and theatre, performance and the practice of performance. Carlson (1996, 6) also observed that:

(i)t's practitioner, almost by definition, do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experience of culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences.

Two main observation were made by Goldberg in discussing performance art that are relevant and can be linked with performance in the context of Malaysian art are: first, artists turned to live performance as a way of expressing their ideas; and second, these performances or events have often been left out in the process of evaluating the history of (visual) art due to the difficulty of placing performance in the history of art. Goldberg (1979, 6) pointed out that how the fact that performance is seen as "hidden":

The extent and richness if this history make the question of omission an even more insistent one. For artists do not merely use performance as a means to attract publicity for their seemingly bohemians stunts and wild life-styles. Rather, performance has been considered as a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which making of art is based. Live gestures have been constantly used as weapon against the conventions of established art.

In the United States in particular, performance studies and theatre were considered as two separate areas. Although being in the same field of studies, the field has different concerns and goals (Carlson 2008, 3). From the perspective of many American scholars, performance art started as a direct or indirect result of interaction between artists from various disciplines such as poetry, literature, theatre, music, and the visual arts that could be traced from as early as the anti-war period in Zurich during World War I and it was only during the 1950s and 1960s that performance art acted as an extension or rejection of the commodification of fine art, which can be seen in works that were produced by artists like George Maciunas, Allan Kaprow, Ana Mendieta, Chris Burden, Carolee Schneemann, and many others. In the 1960s, performance was popular among the Fluxus community with influential members such as composer John Cage and George Brecht. During this period, performance art was meant to be a series of experiments and actions which involved public lectures, poetry recitations, theatre, and so on (see Henri 1974, 133–161; Bronson and Gale 1979, 1; Carlson 1996, 100–120; Auslander 2005, 32–44).

According to Auslander (2005, 32–44), although initially performance art were meant to challenge the conventions of traditional forms of visual art such as painting and sculpting, performance art eventually attracted new audiences through its way of discovering and highlighting new ideas in the realm of visual arts and borrowing styles and ideas from other modes of expressions such as poetry, literature, music, drama and theatre, and others. These new mode of expression requires new ways of analysis. Carlson (2008, 4) highlights that during the 1980s, American theatrical theory was influenced by the importation of the semiotic theory from Europe. As this concern mostly with textual studies, the analysis of theatre called for an alternative approach as written by Carlson “with a recognition of the importance of performance as experience.” This could be seen as, “a shift from art object to art event, is the collapsing of binaries, headed by head of subject and object, or in the case of performance, spectator and actor.” (Carlson 2008, 8)

Unlike theatre or performing arts (forms of creative activity that are performed in front of an audience, such as drama, music, and dance), performance art does not depict fictitious characters based on formal scripts. Instead, the actions or spoken words used in performance art is a form of communication between the artist and the audience, as demonstrated in *Lepas Tangan*.

It also relies on the live presence of the artist and the actions of the body to create an ephemeral art form that are experienced by both the performer and the audience. Performances such as this, occur only once and embody the concept of being transience in time. Through their performance, translation of visual art understanding and comprehension is channelled into various body movements and actions, responding to the use of space, props, and even involving the audiences (Goldberg 1998, 20). Victor Turner draws key distinctions between performance art and the performing arts. He asserted that performance art is “making, not faking” (Turner 1982, 93). This was further exemplified by Coogan (2011) in her observation on how artists were actually shot in the arm, car windows were actually smashed and skin was truly sunburned in these performances. These were actually real physical experiences that the artists experienced and were not illusions (Coogan 2011, 11). Coogan adds that, “Live performance lives in the experiential, a process made public, an encounter inviting the viewer to engage, bringing their own personal meaning to the work” (2011, 17).

In discussing performance art, Coogan (2011, 10) highlights four pillars that must constitute this art form—body, site, audience, and time:

The body, site, audience and time are its four pillars, with corporeal action the central axis. Artists turned to the physical body and brought an ‘aliveness’, a temporality and instability to artworks. Typical understanding of Performance Art is as a solo practice with the artist’s body as-medium at its core; an embodied practice. But the practice may also incorporate other bodies: performers and audience members... It is the action of the body, the authenticity of an activity, that frames it as Performance Art. ... Performance Art, from its beginnings, occurred in both alternative and formal locations. Site is a potent element in the framing of the work. A work of live performance on the street will have a distinct reading to one viewed in a gallery context. Indeed a performative video or photograph shot on the street has a different interpretation to one shot in a studio. ... Time, or what is called duration in Performance Art, is a critical element. Performance Art is a time-based practice.

To recall Goldberg’s earlier observation, in Malaysia, the history of performance art (as part of the history visual or fine art) is still in Goldberg’s (1979, 6) word, is still, “hidden” or not being critically or even academically examined from the context of Malaysian art history. In Malaysia, Rahmat Haron (2013) had discussed selected various performative acts in the context of what he sees as radical gestures and Buka Kolektif (2012) is another publication on performance that was produced as part of the documentation of Buka Jalan International Performance Art Festival held at the National Art Gallery.

An example of delineating one of the early forms of interdisciplinary collaborations in the Malaysian art scene—whether intentionally or otherwise—was Salleh Ben Joned’s urination on the *Mystical Reality* catalogue. It was asserted that it was a “performance” (Salleh 1975, 56–59), a part of an act of protest in the exhibition premise where *Towards A Mystical Reality* was exhibited. During the 1970s, early multidisciplinary practitioners in groups such as Anak Alam with members such as Mustapa Haji Ibrahim, Zulkifli Md. Dahlan, Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim, and Latiff Mohidin were the early performance-performing arts collaborators that were highlighted over and over again in Malaysian art history. That said, these early collaborations and their impact is still an under researched area.

Whereas during the 1990s, with the spirit of exploring artistic approaches through various disciplines, performance art had taken place within or as an extension of one's visual artistic practice. The collaborations and explorations between fine art artists and performing artists happened with some members of the Five Arts Centre.

Five Arts Centre was already producing theatre, dance, music, and young people's theatre. The establishment of the centre mooted the interdisciplinary practices and collaborations with its members, such as Wong Hoy Cheong, Marion D'Cruz, and other visual artists. These explorations include performing/ performance as part of artistic works such as installations and video works.

At the same time, performance art was also introduced at a varsity level. Ray Langenbach explored and introduced performance art as part of his exploration in Universiti Sains Malaysia during the early 1990s. A few of the performances included were *Votantu: Crossroad (Persimpangan)* (1990); *Introducing Fish To Fire* (1992), which includes both performance and installation art; and *Zone, Communication & Development In A Postmodern Era: Re-Evaluating The Freirean Legacy International Conference* (1993). Although the impact of such works was limited to the university's context, and the attempts were just through his explorations and were not formally embedded in the studio curriculum, this shows an interesting attempt in introducing performance art in the context of academia.

An antithesis to theatre, performance art challenges art forms, and how audiences consider art and question what art really is. Even in some of the early performances, the question of art was deliberated. For example, the performance *Ais Krim Malaysia (Malaysia's Ice Cream)* (2015) (Figure 2) which was staged by Azizan Rahman Paiman, was a performance piece that discussed and questioned the sense of taste, choices, and agreements. The performance was accompanied with background music from classics such as Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven, which flowed from the built-in stereo of the ice cream box. The artist distributed ice-creams with all of their simplicity, sweetness, and colour. The palatable nuance attempted to portray the biased idea of aesthetics and beauty in the general perceptions of the Malaysian art scene. The ice cream box was also incorporated with a peephole or a mini-gallery which could be seen as an exhibition of a mini-installation that acted like a pun in criticising the Malaysian landscape (see Ali 2015). Azizan (in Ali 2015) commented, "Too often, artists are only interested in making money. So, like ice cream, art has become a commodity, a kind of instant art. What I am saying is that we must never look at our profession with pride; remember it is nothing more than a commodity."



Figure 2 Azizan Paiman, *Ais Krim Malaysia* (Malaysia's Ice Cream).

Source: Photo courtesy of the artist.

The performance included four push carts painted in the colours of the Malaysian flag and had Japanese words that spell out as *Ais Krim Malaysia*. One thousand cones of ice cream were included and given away to the public through a direct selling approach and negotiated agreements. The artist shouted during the performance (see Ali 2015):

Stop the abuse of art; stop the copycat method of creating work based on formulas established by veterans, more proven artists; stop making pictures that says nothing and are purely for commercial ends - and the powers that be - stop treating art like frivolous commodity.

Performance art has become more of an individual practice through visual artists such as Azizan Rahman Paiman, Shooshie Sulaiman, and Ahmad Fuad Osman; and in the early 2000s, Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, Aisyah Baharuddin, Rahmat Haron, and Chi Too were among those who have explored this medium. In 2006, a performance art festival called *Satu Kali Performance Art Festival* was curated by Ray Langenbach in collaboration with the Future of Imagination Festival in Singapore. This was followed by an art event called *Buka Jalan (Open Road) International Performance Art Festival* which was held at the National Art Gallery and organised by Buka Kolektif. The collaboration with the National Art Gallery insinuates the willingness of the official arts institution in supporting performance arts and the artists involved in their endeavour to continuously develop their artistic critical thoughts in this form. We can observe that since the late 1990s, performance art has become more grounded and has been produced more within the context of fine art practices and by mostly those from a fine arts background.

PERFORMANCE ART AS A SOCIALLY RESPONSIVE MEDIUM

If Coogan highlighted the four pillars—body, site, audience, and time—as the pillars of performance art, this article will discuss the “fifth hidden pillar” of performance art, which is that it is an act of socially responding to pertinent events, ideas, feelings, etc. that needed to be exerted. As such, this section will discuss selected performance art performances that have taken this approach—an outlet or medium for artists to express and react to what is happening around them.

The pertinent exemplification of *Puncak Purnama* in the early part of this article, is an example of how performance art is used as a tool by local Malaysian artists in reacting to their concerns. Such reactions could be seen as an attempt in negotiating conflict, at the same time as an attempt in building strategies for transformation and social change. This argument is could be derived in the context of performance art in Malaysia as this article put forth. Goldberg (2004, 13), for example, pointed out how performance art can be provocative and can be used as a tool for change. He explains:

Provocation is a constant characteristic of performance art, a volatile form that artists use to respond to change—whether political in the broadest sense, or cultural, or dealing with issues of current concern—and to bring about change, in relation to the more traditional disciplines of painting and sculpture, photography, theatre, and dance, or even literature. Performance art never settles exclusively on any one theme, issue or mode of expression; rather, it defines itself in each case by responding provocatively.

As such, it is not a surprise that Malaysian artists used performance art as it is a universal language that can be used in communicating and expressing various life encounters, political understandings, and ideologies.

Before going further into the discussion, it would be pertinent to discuss the context of what is meant by the term “socially responsive” that became the context of deliberation and analysis in this article. The definition or the understanding of performance art as being socially responsive can also be seen or discussed as art that is “socially engaged” or falls under what can be seen as a form of “social art practice.” These terms have been used in explaining certain forms of artistic approaches or art-related activities. Jackson (2011, 13) explains:

[...] for many the word “social” signifies an interest in explicit forms of political change, for other contemporary artists it refers more autonomously to the aesthetic exploration of time, collectively and embodiment as medium and material. Even when social practices address political issues, their stance and their forms differ explicitly in their themes and implicitly in

their assumptions about the role of aesthetics in social inquiry. While some social art practice seeks to innovate around the concept of collaboration, others seek to ironize it. While some social art practice seeks to forge social bonds, many others define their artistic radicality by the degree to which they disrupt the social.

Helguera (2011, 3–8), on the other hand, emphasises on the significance of the role of the artist in producing “socially engaged” art:

[...] (the artist) is an individual whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity. Yet the uncomfortable position of socially engaged art, identified as art yet located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like, is exactly the position it should inhabit. Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. Social interaction occupies a central and inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork. SEA (Socially Engaged Art) is a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action.

Besides socially engaged art, another term, “social art practice” should be deliberated on as well. Jackson (2011, 13) uses the term “social art practice” and has discussed this term within experimental artmaking. Jackson pointed out that the term simply aims to discuss a particular process of art production in which the practice contributes and interacts as a form of public communication with individuals, communities, and institutions. As such, some social art practices emphasise shared, real-time presence as a necessary condition, while others initiate their work through remote and digital means. Artists working in a social art practice environment co-create their work with specific audiences or propose critical interventions within an existing system to expose, exchange, debate, challenge, inspire, or even catalyse change.

Paying much attention to the movement of the body, performance creates and imposes a powerful effect on the audience as they can feel the energy and connection to the performance as it unfolds. Thus, this allows performance art to be an effective medium that can be used to respond, highlight, and communicate pertinent issues and concerns raised by the artists, not only as an expression.

As will be exemplified in the next part of this article, the artists do not produce such performances to provide solutions in making the world a better place or even to solve the problem or issues that they have raised. Instead, it has become a platform in which the artists reflect and respond within their own artistic capacity. As such, “social responsive performance” refers to performance art that responded to various issues among them, social and political, and even economic change through the embodiments that may or may not involve social interactions based on the overlapping and even fluid aforementioned definitions by Jackson and Helguera.

Perhaps the question that one needs to ask with regard to the definition of “socially responsive” art is what purpose does “socially responsive” art serve rather than what constitutes the process of the “artmaking” itself. Some questions that we can ponder on regarding socially responsive performance art include: “What then are the priorities of socially responsive art?”; “Is it simply about mutual exchange or getting participation from the public?”; and “Is it purely just for the sake of art or does it bring about artistic expression and the much needed change in the society?” If social art practice provides art a sense of purpose, socially responsive performance art by artists that will be discussed here, are not only being produced as a sense of calling to the artists, but also as a strategy to raise awareness about issues affecting their community and even the nation at large as well. It is not about the aesthetics in social inquiry, but it hinges on subjects and problems that Helguera (2011) says that normally belong to other disciplines, to temporarily highlight and respond to issues and subjects that could bring new insights to a particular problem or condition.

As this article will discuss further, the implication that performance art simply provides a “voice” for an artist is underrated. Performance art is in fact a medium that allows one to be socially responsive as its intensity allows performance artists to have an impromptu response on politics, economics, and social issues in an unconventional, ephemeral, yet impactful form of communication. The ephemeral or transient nature of performance art allow personal reflections and responses to be expressed, and yet it is an artform that cannot be as a lasting object. This ephemeral or transient nature allow a more impromptu reactions and proclamations

of explicit social and political messaging by the artists. Performance art, through its collaborative, participative and public execution, as this article will argue, is an important art form that embodies that that is fuelled with personal reflections and responses.

As such, socially responsive performance art does provide a lens of analysis going through the artist's mind as his or her morals are projected through dramatic performance by answering a simple question, "How shall I act in this situation?" The practice behind such an act is not about ridiculing society or matters in general, but restating the classic stand of the philosophical belief, and the personal and intellectual journey that the artist had experienced.

Intan Rafiza's *Garisian* (Line) (2010), for example, which was performed on 27 November 2010 in MapKL, was her response to her own experience with the Malaysian citizenship registration system that she had to undergo to secure her daughter's citizenship. The artist used her body to indicate the journey she had to go through in respecting the choices made by her daughter in choosing her citizenship. In the performance, the artist used her own body to paint an artwork of her reflection on the whole bureaucratic process trying to register as a Malaysian citizen in comparison to the processes that she had to undergo at the American Embassy (Intan Rafiza 2010; Irafiza 2010). Intan Rafiza's performance, or at least the issue she highlighted, was an example of Malaysia's public service that has a significant image of being sluggish, inefficient, and even being corrupt.

Intan Rafiza's response in her performance above reinstates how performance art in this sense is seen as part of her personal reflection and response. As the artist draws from her personal experience, the performance that is birthed out from her personal journey as an artist is a reflective connotation of how performance art is fuelled with the possibility in the attempt to create a connection between the artist and his or her ontological experience. By coupling "performance" with "reaction," the development of a principle of how performance art in Malaysia can be socially responsive creates a concrete correlation between how we, as humans, relate to one another and how we perceive, make sense of the surrounding, how we act in particular situations, settings, and relationships. Again, the artist's reality dictates the way he or she perceives the epistemological aspect of his or her experience. As theatre scholar, Nicholas Ridout (2009, 5) states: "ethical theory denotes a practical approach to philosophy, addressing the central question: 'How shall I act?'"

Evidently, as Ridout continues to argue, the question "How shall I act?" has an underlying meaning in the context of theatre and performance because it not only seeks to answer the question of "how I should act in my everyday life," but also "how should I act on stage?"

Performance artists draw his or her experiences, couples it with their own practice and merge it with complex semiotic chains, the performer's experience become gradually processed into elements of their performance work in joint creative processes (Visakko 2020, 369). Visakko (2020, 370) also discussed how the epistemological context of the performer which is rather personal associates with the ways experiences are dealt with during the particular moment. Interestingly, these context dictates the dynamics of how every individual interprets everyday life very differently, achieving a social interaction between the performer and the audience. This process is known as engaging communities. Under the umbrella of socially engaged performance, in particular, the idea of how an artist should engage his or her community in their performance and what might this performance do in this particular context must be discussed. This sort of phenomena according to Visakko (2020, 371) explores an inner "writing technique" which is meant to source identity-central materials with the purpose of redefining them as components of a "joint voice" in a targeted society or community. This then paves a way towards reflecting a specific ideology of channel building, leaving space for individuals to interpret the private realm of the performer to the audience of group's discursive perimeter and then, collectively projecting it onward to the public.

Not only as personal reactions, socially responsive performances can also take form in a collective format and could be making comments inspired by the aspirations of the civil society. *Mandi Bunga* (Flower Bath) (Figure 3), which was performed on 26 October 2013, was a performance that was participated by over a hundred people who decked themselves out in yellow and marched from the Singapore Art Museum to the National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 3 Photos of Mandi Bunga during the 2013 Singapore Biennale.

Source: Photo by Shirley Ng.

In Malay culture, *mandi bunga* is often associated with a practice or a ritual to evade bad luck, or to increase one's aura, usually done for those who are looking for potential partners or for those who will wed. Sharon Chin's *Mandi Bunga* involved groups of people from different backgrounds, races, religions, and even nationalities, but the twist to this performance was the fact that the performers or the participating public had to wear the colour yellow with yellow props, i.e., yellow basins, dippers, flowers, and yellow fabric. For those who are familiar with Malaysian history and context, the colour yellow could easily allude to the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, or lately, Bersih, the Coalition of Free and Fair Elections that calls for a thorough reform of the electoral process in Malaysia. Whenever rallies by Bersih (clean) are held, supporters wear yellow T-shirts as a symbol of protest.

Sharon Chin (2013) explained that *Mandi Bunga* came from her experiences in taking part in Bersih 2.0 and 3.0, and asserted that *Mandi Bunga* has nothing and yet everything to do with Bersih. This performance consists of three simple parts: (1) the process of making the yellow sarong to be worn during the bath, (2) the act of bathing in public while wearing the sarong, and finally, (3) the exhibition of the documentation process of the event.

The most important aspect of this socially responsive performance, according to Sharon Chin (2013), was the questions that she engaged with in developing this socially responsive work in terms of collectivity—"What does it mean to do something alone?," "What does it mean to do something together?," and "How can we be ourselves with others?" Through *Mandi Bunga*, it can be argued that Sharon Chin's performance can be read as a socially responsive performance that brought the community together through the playing of individual and collective identities (Sharon 2017). Although this performance could be read as alluding to a provocation towards the political power structure and situation happening in Malaysia, *Mandi Bunga* served to provoke and stimulate society to respond and think about certain behaviours either individually or collectively, and how social interactions could be developed with and even without the influence of other people. This could be seen as reflected by Jackson (2011, 13), who raised the thought on how performance could be used and how it consists of interactions that involve individuals, communities and even larger institutions through a shared experience and real-time presence.

Socially responsive performance art is also a form of expression in revolting against corruption and power. Rahmat Haron staged a public performance in his response to the defeat of the ruling government party, Barisan Nasional, on 5 June 2018. The artist shaved his 1.5 metre-long dreadlocks as a part of his performance of his *nazar* (vow or promise). His act or performance was not a surprise as Rahmat Haron (cited in Lin 2012) had explained how his performance raised the issue of "... social interaction and compromise in regards to individual problems, conflicts and the complex psychologies that come into play..." As such, the 2018 performance was meant to be his immediate response to the fact that Malaysia (at the time of the performance) was finally getting rid of the long dominant governmental party.

Not only local politics, but major economic policy change had also affected artists. Intan Rafiza held a performance titled *\$\$candal Makan Duit* (literally, Eating Money Scandal) (Figure 4) for the Crossover *Lintasan* Exhibition 3, in which she reflected and responded through her performance on the current economic situation. As described by Ili Farhana (2015), Intan Rafiza started her performance by requesting the audience to place a part of their personal belongings into a glass of water as she walked across the room to collect the items as a form of a "ritual". This personal touch between the artist and the audience indirectly created a relationship between the artist, the performance and the audience to powerfully reinforce the experience.

She then began her performance by writing texts on her body. She wrote "this is now" on her throat and proceeded with the word "scandal" on her upper chest. Upon ringing the bell in her hand several times, the artist positioned herself on a piece of paper. She then tied some money above her head using red ribbons, arranged some more around her, and later inserted some into her mouth. The artist then placed herself on a pedestal, slowly standing above it and later invited the audience to respond on a piece of paper. As the artist continued to fill her mouth with rolls of money, the audience began to feel the tension and intensity of the performance.

If Intan Rafiza used money as the main subject to provide commentary on the issues involving the country's corruption that involve local politicians as reported in the news, the work could also be interpreted as trying to reflect the tension among Malaysians regarding the rising living costs and the effects of the economic inflation and implementation of the Goods Service Tax (GST). The artist raised the larger question with regard to fluid interpretation by the audience about the performance, the current reality and the recent issue in the spotlight of the Malaysian public. If Intan Rafiza's act of using her body as a medium of expression reflects how human life is bound by their economic means, her gesture of tying a red ribbon around her neck could be interpreted as how society has been bound by the chains in carrying out daily routines and the cycle of life, oftentimes unable to escape from the larger behaviour and interactions with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services to ascertain the survival of modern humans.



Figure 4 *\$\$candal Makan Duit* (2015) performance by Intan Rafiza.

Source: Photo courtesy of the artist.

Scandal Makan Duit reflects performance as a universal language that is competent enough to communicate and express various life encounters, political understandings, and ideologies as reiterated by Goldberg (2004, 12). Since performance art pays much attention to the movement of the body, it creates a powerful effect on the audience by allowing the audience to feel the energy of the performance, to experience and connect with the moment in which the event takes place, and also to introduce and implement awareness of current ongoing issues happening in the country. As Schechner (2003, xi) explains that performance art involves bodily actions of drama that express crisis, schism, and conflict. In socially responsive performance art in this case, the artist emphasises on putting themselves in “...disequilibrium and then displaying how they regain their balance psychophysically, narratively, and socially—only to lose their balance, and regain it, again and again” (Schechner 2003, xi).

Other issues that artists address through socially responsive performance art circle around social commentaries and issues such as gender and identity, and even religion. Mislina Mustaffa’s *Hasutan* (Incitement) (Figure 5), which was held in Narrow Marrow, Penang on 30 September 2017, examined and raised questions regarding the discrimination that they (women) face due to their gender and identity. Wearing only black undergarments, Mislina Mustaffa divided her audience and invited them to participate in the performance by asking thought-provoking questions. She addressed the issue of women’s identities by using only her voice, questioning the role of her body and drawing from her experience as a woman in Malaysia. She questioned her audience (Mislina 2017);

Am I a human being? Yes? No? Could it be that I am an animal? Is this the body of a man? Is this the body of a human being? Is this the body of a woman? Can this body be anything at all? This body is a man, is a woman, is an animal, is a teacher, is a nurse, is a mother, is a sister, is a tree, is a Malay, Muslim, woman, a Malaysian and can be anything at all. It can be anybody at all. No wonder this body is a *hasutan* (incitement).

In this performance, Mislina Mustaffa powerfully transformed her body to display and even share her female experience. While the implication of the body being a *hasutan* or incitement is a really powerful way to portray the female experience, Mislina Mustaffa’s performance dwelt with the body as an object. As such, this performance instigated various backgrounds, belief systems, races, and education levels of the audience due to how they perceive and preconceive femininity and sexuality of a woman based on the body.

No doubt, at its worst, socially responsive performance art can be seen as utterly inappropriate, unnecessary, dull, or absurd. Nevertheless, at its best, socially responsive performance art is a crucial tool in projecting the basic psychological and physical needs of human beings, which includes the need for shelter, food, communication and interaction, self-consciousness, humanity, and even concerns about the future, life, and the world we live in. Socially responsive performance art has been a powerful tool in forcing spectators to think about issues in life that can appear rather disturbing and uncomfortable, and at the same time, performance is also a tool to create humour while calling attention to the absurdities in life and the irony of human behaviour.

In another work, Aisyah Baharuddin’s *Barah* (Cancer) (2015) (Figure 6) was produced as her response to the reflection of how religion has been misused as a means to manipulate women. The 15-minute performance was done in front of a mixed-media painting by the artist in the background—of a woman



Figure 5 Mislina Mustaffa in *Hasutan* (Incitement), Narrow Marrow, Penang, 2017.

Source: Photo by Clara Ling.

dressed in a black *hijab* and *niqab* (veil), revealing only her eyes alongside with a long piece of knitwear draping down from the painting. The entire performance was a reflection of a deep indication of the female body which had been infected by a form of “cancer.” Aisyah Baharuddin used 20 dried and fresh loofahs. The interactive performance required the audience to peel off the skin of this fruit. Loofah, according to the artist, was a metaphor for the human bodies that are infected with cancer, and in the context of her performance, not a medical cancer but a religious cancer instead. The entire performance by Aisyah Baharuddin significantly contributed to the construction of the complexity of the female experience, especially with regard to the often-imposed religious identity. The artist addressed the issue that religion is oftentimes like a cancer agent, manipulated, and perverted for human ambition, causing the entire community to fear its threat.

The usage of food on the part of the female artists in their socially responsive performances was particularly important as well, given the traditional association of women with the body, with the ability to feed and nurture, and with transience and mortality. Aisyah Baharuddin raised the question on how the representation of the woman’s body and the image of a woman have been wrongly manipulated. Women, meant to have the power to nurture and shape values, the ability to create, and to produce and nurture through family institutions, are sometimes objectified as an instrument of a religious dogma.

Not only that, female performance art tended to be the ones taking a more responsive approach in performances. That said, male artists also responded to their immediate site where they were to perform and the recent issues that were highlighted in the Malaysian public sphere. *Sembah (Worship) Vol.1* by Fared Ayam or Jamaluddin Mohd Fared, for example, was performed during Buka Jalan International Performance Art Festival. He responded to the sculpture titled *Harmony and Unity* that was placed in the compound of the National Art Gallery. His direct response to the public sculpture was actually not based on the immediate response to the public sculpture itself, but the contested idea of multiculturalism. Wearing shorts during the performance, Fared Ayam tried to convey the message that people with power (including religious leaders) and even ordinary people often misuse religion or Islam as a tool to bully, intimidate, and silence others. He performed his personal response to this situation by pouring a can of beer on his head, and recited the call to prayer or *azan* (Islamic call for prayers) in the “commando rest” position. The “commando rest” position, a position that is often used to bully in schools and even among military forces, symbolises the dark or evil stance, while reciting the *azan* symbolises the purer aspects of life. By performing in front of the public sculpture at the National Art Gallery, the audience could relate to the public tension with the sensitive issues in Malaysia that invited public outcry at the time—such as the arson of the local church, the complaints against the local mosque, and the issue of the use of the word Allah in the al-Kitab (Bible written in Malay language).



Figure 6 Aisyah Baharuddin in *Barah (Cancer)*, Fergana Art Space, 2015.
Source: Aisyah (2015).

Some of the contexts and ideas that the artists wanted to relay during the performance went beyond the national boundary. Intan Rafiza's performance in *Merah Itu Darah* (Red is Blood) (Figure 7) (held on 28 May 2012 along Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur) was an instance in which the artist felt that she had to respond to the state of emergency declared by Burma on 10 June 2012. Wearing only a red dress with red lipstick and paint splashed all over her face, the colour served as a powerful metaphor to describe the "panic attacks" that the Burmese had to go through during that particular period. The need for survival and the ongoing struggle with anxiety was present and powerfully portrayed throughout the performance. Although the subject matter and concerns were beyond the Malaysian border, the performance addressed the issue of life and humanity (Irafiza 2012). In her own words, Intan Rafiza wrote:

Dalam melihat disekitar Jalan Sultan yang mana bau hanyir kencing penginap jalanan, sisa tahi dan penggunaan bahan terlarang menjadikan pertunjukan kali ini cukup istimewa. Inilah kehidupan asing yang mana syurga buat mereka yang mendiaminya. Menidakkan ketetapan orang lain bukanlah satu tindak balas yang baik, malah memahami dan menghargai kadangkala mengajar untuk maksud apa itu rasa degupan jantung dan terus menjalani hidup. Aksi mendakap tiang batu adalah tindakbalas spontan tentang ruang yang sedang dipijak. Tiang dan dinding putih yang keras telah menjadi saksi bagaimana manusia jalanan ini menghargai kehidupan. Dedikasi buat mangsa pertumpahan darah di Burma. Kadangkala kepercayaan buat manusia hilang rasa percaya sesama sendiri.

This performance was indeed special, looking at the surroundings of Jalan Sultan which was filled with the stench and stale smell of excrement from the homeless as well as the usage of prohibited props for the performance. This is the alienated life that is considered paradise to them. To oppose one's resolutions is not a good response, while to understand and appreciate simply means to teach what it is to have a heartbeat and pursue life. The act of embracing the stone pillar is a spontaneous response towards the space. The pillars and hard, white walls are witnesses of how the homeless live and appreciate life. Dedicated to the bloodshed of victims in Burma. Sometimes, belief is what makes humans lose their sense of trust amongst themselves [our translation].

With this, it is clear that such a performance acts as a crucial and powerful tool in advocating human rights, and promoting social and political justice that goes beyond national borders.



Figure 7 Intan Rafiza in *Merah Itu Darah* (Red Is Blood), Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur, 2012.

Source: Photo courtesy of Intan Rafiza.



Figure 8 Azizan Paiman in *Si Tua Si* (Yes or No), Muzium Darul Ridzuan, Ipoh, 2019.
Source: Photo courtesy of Nazrul Rahman and Hafifah Jusoh.

In another instance, Azizan Rahman Paiman, who performed at the opening ceremony of the Ipoh International Art Festival, rolled out an unusual performance by smashing a toilet seat in front of Muzium Darul Ridzuan's entrance while wearing a hazmat suit. Though bizarre, it did enough to gather an enthusiastic applause from the crowd and stirred the audience to be aware of climate change. This performance, entitled *Si Tua Si* (Yes or No) (Figure 8), which was performed on 11 December 2019, was a call to the public to take on the crisis using less talk and more action. "Climate is not so much about the 'weather' in this work. It's more about the mood and atmosphere surrounding a 'crisis' – be it climate, culture or politics. This work is meant to cut through the noise," said Paiman after the performance (Goh 2019).

The performance started with a group of performers led by Paiman surrounding a toilet bowl on a wooden trolley that created a squeaking sound when pulled and a speaker box in front of the trolley with a recording of climate change conversations. The artist then started pointing fingers at the other performers, dragging the trolley behind, smashing the toilet bowl, and finally cleaning the debris it created. In all honesty, this could possibly deal with the shared concern of climate change and the pressing issue that in order to tackle climate change, it starts with society initiative.

CONCLUSION

Malaysian performance artists, as this article has discussed, reflected the issues happening within our country through their socially responsive performance art. Clearly, their performances have featured significant issues in Malaysia today as these artists have highlighted the current hardships and struggles through implications and powerful narrations constituted for the questioning of local social and political narratives. These performance artists, through their performances, attempted to highlight the more complex Malaysian society and history. The socially responsive performance art is in fact a way to draw attention to the various political, economic, and social concerns based on the actual choices made by the performance artists themselves.

From time to time, the evolution of a work of art is thoroughly addressed and seen as a continual development of the art industry worldwide. Artists are becoming bolder in bringing in new ideas, merging media, and trying out new styles. As such, we can argue that through performance art, these artists could be seen as playing multiple roles—as a storyteller, a poet, and an artist all at once. A performer must never artificialise their acts or even be pretentious, as to perform is to question the existence of the subject matter or issues surrounding them that speak about the human condition that we live in, be it social, cultural, or spiritual values that belong to an individual or to an entire society.

The performer does not base his or her story on his or her own interpretation. Instead, the performance undergoes its own consciousness, and has its own responsibility, dignity, determination, and enthusiasm. To perform, he or she must consider his or her own level of concentration, voice, body movement, objects, breathing, projection, speed, and so on to gather the soul and mind together.

A socially responsive performance art must first leave a long-lasting impact on his or her audience instead of just performing for the sake of expression. The audience would be able to remember the expression of colours on a canvas but would they be able to comprehend its past incidents or current moments which led to the creation of the idea? Performance art allows the “process” to be observed through the audience’s immediate thoughts and artistic expressions by immersing in the performance. Even though socially responsive performance art orients itself towards highlighting a certain pertinent issue or as a response towards matters concerning society, the reception from or impact on its audience can be somewhat diametrical.

As such, it could be argued that both the artist and the audience, during the process of performing and watching, and even engaging with the performance, go on a journey to discover unknown boundaries by having the ephemeral connection that is hoped to make a lasting impact. As performance artists must put aside narcissism and ego to discover the utmost classified notion of creativity, this also allows them to address and highlight the human struggle. A performer’s action of drawing this energy from his or her inner self is considered a profound representation of the performer’s inner responses towards life as well as his or her surroundings.

The mode and way of expression in performance art through the use of mediums or live materials, for instance, the body, the voice, and the expression have also, as this article discussed, been used and explored by Malaysian artists. Although in the context of visual arts, performances have not been exponentially explored nor is it a well-accepted practice—the direct flow of ideas from the performer to the audience can at times be challenging and provocative, and impose a different representation of thought—this form of communication developed in performance arts expands various understandings and interpretations of art and social issues pertaining to the immediate Malaysian society.

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