

‘Indonesian Comics Are Advanced’: The Challenges Faced by Indonesian Underground Comics Artists¹

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini menggambarkan arti penting dari komik bawah tanah di Indonesia mengingat tidak ada industri komik nasional. Komik bawah tanah berarti bahwa penjualannya dilakukan secara independen di luar jalur pemasaran biasa, dan komik memuat gambar-gambar dan gaya tutur yang tidak konvensional. Penulis memfokuskan diri pada kehidupan dan karya Athonk, seorang komikus independen Indonesia, tidak menggunakan cara pemasaran konvensional dan memperkuat jaringan global para komikus independen dan penggemar melalui internet.

Kesal dengan absurditas kehidupan kebudayaan dan politik Indonesia, Athonk secara konsisten menciptakan cerita-cerita tentang perjuangan antara yang punya kekuasaan dan yang tidak punya kekuasaan dengan sinisme melalui para tokohnya dan bahasa yang digunakannya. Penulis menempatkan Athonk dalam konteks sejarah kesenian Indonesia, dan debat antara ‘seni tinggi’ dan ‘seni rendah’ yang mendominasi wacana tentang kesenian di Indonesia. Situasinya mendiskreditkan para komikus sebagai bentuk ‘seni rendah’ yang masih menjadikannya masih jauh dari memperkuat posisinya. Secara ironis, publik menyambut karya seninya dan hal ini mendorongnya untuk tetap berkarya. Tulisan ini diharapkan akan memberikan gambaran yang lebih luas tentang para komikus Indonesia sebagai bentuk kesenian dan ekspresi yang potensial di masa mendatang.

When I searched the internet for information on Indonesian comics one day, I came across several hits on Athonk’s name. For this name alone, there is a great number of website

addresses in country and overseas that are in relation with him. Athonk is a world-class comics artist. In the Indonesian context, that is an interesting phenomenon at a time when

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there are no local comics artists that are considered successful and popular in Indonesia.

Comics go back a long way in history as Mirzoeff put it (1999): visual culture cannot be separated from studying its history. The theme of stories, the narrative style, graphics, even the mode of selling comics created by a comics artist, as is the case with other artists, are always shaped by his environment. Edward Bruner (1986) believes that every person is actively interpreting his or her experience for expression. It is believed therefore that the biography, family background, and the people closest to the artist play an active role in shaping the artist's expression. Regional traditional arts, foreign comics, social and political conditions during a given period contribute to the abundance of Indonesian comics. Comics are very closely related to the conditions surrounding their authors, as expressed by Ben Anderson (1990) in his study of strip comics as a representation of social political conditions in Indonesia.

Sapto Raharjo alias Athonk creates comics, determines his own market segment and tries to distribute them. His work includes underground comics, namely comics multiplied and distributed directly by the comic's artist himself. Usually, the contents of such comics are a revolt against well-established social and political norms in society.

The hegemony of the New Order government with its economic growth created the commodification of arts centered on galleries. The contents of Athonk's comics and his choice of comics as an arts medium are regarded, as 'low class' art is a revolt against such condition. The unique thing about this is that Athonk's way of launching such criticism is acceptable to many circles. His comics are being sought after up to this day. This article also reviews the strategy present in the form and the substance of Athonk's comics, related to

his background, the Indonesian and world fine arts history context, as well as Indonesia's social-political conditions at the time such comics were created.

Comics, history and conditions in Indonesia

Comics, according to Scott McCloud (1993:9), are 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'. According to general understanding, comics are graphics telling a story with written narrative. Therefore, the study of comics as a form of art does not merely take into consideration the fine arts aspects such as: graphic style, graphics, or composition; but also the literature aspects such as: story genre, writing style, and theme. Such combination of form and story makes up the 'substance', the place of conveying its author's ideas.

The art of comics worldwide has its characteristics in every country. Such variety derives from the tradition of comics and fine arts in the context of each individual country. For example, both American and European comics emphasize the readers' logics and a stable narrative style. Japanese comics tell a story using more emotional effects of situational sketches. American comics mostly tell short stories, whereas European comics almost always tell about long adventures. Modern comics in America are mainly a result of team work involving various parties with their various fields of specialization: story designer, writer, text writer, editor, layout specialist, sketch artist, line enforcing artist, colour artist, and others. In Europe and Japan, less people are involved in the creation of comics. One artist only that completes all processes does production.

Historically, it is believed that Indonesian comics originate from the times of the

Borobudur temple reliefs on the Island of Java. These reliefs in fact correspond to the above-described definition of comics. However, modern Indonesia comics did not appear until post-independence days. Prior to that period, Indonesians were made used to reading strip comics, newspapers caricatures, and propaganda posters during Dutch and Japanese colonial times. Daily newspapers in the independence era published various translated strip comics imported from Europe and America. Translations of Western comics books also flooded the market. The impact of these strips was so strong that they influenced locally created comics. It is not surprising that the narrative style and graphic style in Indonesian comics tradition were more influenced by Western comics (Berman 1998:19).

Ben Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1990:156–173) describes how comics become a means for expressing the thoughts and feelings of the people about their people in power.² However, the regime in power also has its own thoughts and feelings about comics. President Soekarno, who was anti-Western at that time, accused comic's artists of committing subversion, and declared their work as litter and 'poison of the West'. Consequently, raids were conducted on schools, comic's stalls were invaded, and comics were burnt. In the early 1980s, when Indonesian comics started to 'breathe' again, the New Order government stated that comics were ineducative, and causing children to become lazy (Berman 1990). However, a list of leading figures appeared in the history of comic's development in the 1970–80s. In that period, names like R.A. Kosasih, Jan Mintaraga, and Ganes Th became known, each of them creating stories with Indonesian 'lo-

cal' themes including puppeteer, arts of self-defense (*persilatan*) and even local super heroes. A good marketing network including comic's agents in several large cities supported their reputation.

The situation in Indonesia's local comics industry was in dire condition in the 1990s. The head of the Gramedia group, as the largest publisher, stated that comics imported from Japan recorded the highest sales values, namely 90%. High production costs for completing all comics creation processes from the beginning to the end prompted publishers to choose the easy and economic way by purchasing licenses to publish imported comics (Berman 1990). Such standstill motivated the emergence of independent comics production. There are two main sources of Independent comics: arts school students, and societal organization activists. The arts school version of independent comics has limited distribution networks so that they are not easily accessible by the general public. These comics are 'strange', have little substance, vulgar, and tend towards pornography (pornography is prohibited in Indonesia). On the other hand, this type of comics tries to develop imagination, free expression as evident from the graphics and narrative style. These comics' artists work while they are students, and stop after they graduate and get employed. Activist comics are very different, even though they, too, may be arts students. This type of comics is usually financed by a certain agency for spreading social issues in the community. Independent comics that choose the informal distribution channel are known as underground comics.³

²Anderson (1990) says that comics are a way for the people to express their political communication through symbols, just as the people in power do it through monuments.

³There was a rather great number of this type of comics in the 1990s. Please refer to Berman (2000). Currently, there are symptoms of the emergence of comics communities such as *Komikaze*, *Apotik Komik*, *Komunitas Daging Tumbuh*, and the like.

The story of Indonesian comics in general resembles that of other popular cultural industry. As is the case with film, novels, or the television industry, comic's actors are never successful in obtaining a specific market segment. Articles, discussions or seminars are busy blaming the production structure and network for this, as well as sales that are dominated by imports. These are indeed existing issues. On the other hand, however, many questions arise concerning the ability of artists to present materials that are acceptable by the majority market segment that has been used to imported products. Comics artists fail to speak the 'same language' as the 'readers' language' or that of their viewers. Even worse than that, they are considered totally unable to determine their market segment.

Fine arts history in Indonesia

The arts debate in Western arts and history of arts theory curriculum recognizes high art and low art. High art is exclusive art, enjoyed by limited circles, usually intellectual and higher social class circles; meanwhile, low art include works of art produced en masse, that enjoy popularity among the general society and are inexpensive. This debate is also going on in the world of fine arts. High art in fine arts includes avant-garde paintings and sculptures of intellectual artists not produced en masse. Low art in this perspective includes craft products, considered to be produced without a lot of thought or effort, so that these can be produced in great quantities, and are easily digested and obtained. Therefore, these works of art can be enjoyed by the society at large. This view is considered ethnocentric because it undervalues non-Western community arts with a context different from Western arts

(Pirous 1997).⁴

This debate, too, has entered the frame of Indonesian fine arts debate. The first and second generation of modern Indonesian painters was educated in Western painting style and technique. Therefore, they followed the Western criteria of 'high and low' art. It was only twenty years later that national awareness and pride of traditional art elements emerged (Spanjaard 1998a:44).⁵

In addition to the issues of high-low art, ethnocentricity and tradition, fine arts in Indonesia have always been marked by ideological conflict between socialists versus humanist. Humanist art is oriented towards the artist's individual expression (along with the financial compensation that always accompanies the same), whereas socialist art is oriented towards the social spirit. Humanist art concentrates on esthetical achievements based on the conviction that the quality of art in the form of quality achievement is the materialization of individual freedom without the obligation to use social problems as inspiration for artistic creative work. At the same time, the socialist ideology in arts develops following its time, bringing social realities of society to the surface, convey social related messages or makes associate part of the fine arts production and distribution process. Such ideological conflict starts out with the polemics between *Mooi Indië* versus Indonesian Painter Association (*Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia - Persagi*) (Purnomo 1998:13).⁶

⁴Also, Mirzoeff (1999:23) says that this view will also find it difficult to study works of multimedia modern art.

⁵Concerning the attachment of Indonesian modern artists to their tradition, please also refer to Esmeralda and M. Bollandsee (1987). Pirous (1997) demonstrates that the reflection of modernism of Indonesian artists values more traditional values.

⁶Persagi thinks that painters Mooi Indie influenced by European painters who had been greatly impressed by the Indonesian nature and culture did not see the reality

There were also differences among fine arts educational institutions at the time of their establishment (ITB Bandung versus ASRI-now ISI at Yogyakarta) (Spanjaard 1998b, 1998c:62–65, 64–65). Likewise, there have been conflicts between communist party affiliated *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra)* artists and the *Manifes Kebudayaan* group during the Soekarno's era (Dermawan 1998:58–59).⁷

In the New Order era, such conflict occurred between 'gallery artists' and street artists who opposed the New Order's status quo. Such conflicts were significant in forming Indonesia's characteristic fine arts history.

During the New Order year under General Soeharto, economic growth stability became the main priority. During that era, Indonesia's crude oil became Indonesia's main export commodity which created the class of the 'new rich' (*orang kaya baru*). Art galleries and exhibition halls appeared everywhere in increasing numbers, and the economic standard of 'conformist' artists kept increasing. *Institut Kesenian Jakarta* (The Jakarta Arts Institute) and an arts centre were established in 1968 in Jakarta to provide increased access to public arts facilities. Behind the scenes, however, daily social life was under military regime suppression. Arts for the people, or arts exercising criticism of the government's policy were not let to live. All Western style arts referred to as the 'Bandung style' that had been banned in the 1960s were released because these were deemed politically sterile. In the 1970s, the

of the people's sufferings during the colonial era (please also refer to Kusnadi 1998a; Wisetrotomo 1998:58–59, and Sudjojono 2000:1–8).

⁷ Even though some senior artists from Yogyakarta such as Hendra Gunawan and Henk Ngantung joined LEKRA, not all artists whose work was oriented at the people became members of LEKRA. The Bandung-Yogyakarta polemics, on the one hand evoked an intensive and mutually fulfilling dialogue for the development of their creativity, especially in the 1970s (refer to Spanjaard 1998c:65).

'Bandung style' spread on even to the Yogyakarta artist community. This was certainly not because of the spirit of freedom. Their abstract and surrealism style was relatively 'clean' from political affairs.

Parallel to economic and information globalization by the end of the 1980s, a student and young artist movement emerged opening up their own forum in unexpected places. Artists refused the formal labels of fine arts, elitism, and the excessive materialization of arts. They used everyday popular media for their work. The arts of posters, comics, installations, graffiti, street shows, stickers and T-shirt illustrations emerged. Artist circles genuinely concerned about the poor, used public domain to launch their protest. (Berman 1999:7).⁸

Athonk studied in the shadows of ideological conflict that occurred in Indonesian fine arts, and ultimately became part of such conflict.

Athonk's Biography

Athonk is the youngest child of five, and was born in 1971. His family stayed in Semarang, in the Kaliungu area. His father was a military man who educated his children the hard way. Just as any traditional father-child relationship in Jawa, Athonk's relationship with his father remains very formal until now. Athonk's family is Adventist Christians with a strict religious education pattern. Athonk's eldest brother studies at ISI, *Institut Seni Indonesia* (Indonesian Arts Institute) in Yogyakarta, and has chosen sculpture as media of his expression. Athonk's other elder siblings have

⁸ Streets here can include all open space in the public domain: residential area, parks, factory yards, announcement boards, or houses of worship (refer also to Moelyono 1997). This movement has many similarities with the characteristics and strategy of the Pop Art movement in Europe and America in the 1960–1970s.

chosen a more 'normal' call in life such as accountant or religionist.

In addition to the father's salary, the family also tried to obtain additional income. Little Athonk, about 6 years old at the time, was given the task to deliver and sell ice-sticks (*es lilin*) produced in the family's freezer. In addition to ice-sticks (*es lilin*), the family also ran a storybook and comics rental business. The rental was in existence at Athonk's early age and when he started remembering things. He grew up with these books and comics. He created his own comics, and then lent and circulated them to his friends (Berman 1995). Little Athonk grew up with an amazing talent for drawing. That is why his father and mother never prohibited him from spending his time reading comics.

His neighborhood was home to the 'Kokkang' caricature artist community (Komunitas karikaturis Kaliungu), established by Budi Santoso alias Itos, Athonk's neighbor. Itos guided youngsters in his neighborhood enabling them to draw caricatures that would be eligible for publication in magazines and daily newspapers in big cities. Athonk says he has never learnt how to draw from Itos. However, he grew up with the Kokkang community, and obtained many inputs, especially about the implications of the choice of media on copyrights.

Since his student days at ISI, Yogyakarta in 1990, Athonk's style and appearance resembled punkers, complete with attributes such as chain and boots. He used the punk culture attributes as a protest against the political and social situation not tolerating differences. Athonk started to get acquainted with world fine arts theory and history, even though many theories and discussions were a disappointment for him. He rented a room at that time, and then a house in the Sosrowijayan area, close to the tourist centre in Yogya. Due to his home's lo-

cation, Athonk had frequent contacts with tourists and tourism industry workers. He also got to know the art of tattoo, and got his first tattoo, namely the face of Duck Donald on his right arm. At the same time, he got acquainted with student activist circles. In line with the spirit of the 1990s, the anti-New Order student movement appeared more militant, more organized and closer to the people's interests. Athonk got increasingly involved in student meetings, demonstrations, advocacy actions, non-government organizations and, of course, with the security apparatus. The apparatus once confiscated his posters, even though they were subsequently returned. He was arrested by security apparatus several times, and he was once detained and electrocuted in one of intelligence office in Jakarta, in 1996, for 4 days. At about the same time, he was expelled from ISI, Yogya.

The masterpieces of Anthok's work were created at that time. He created a lot of poster art, filled with small graphics and text similar to the panels of a comic. It took him months, in some cases even years, to make his posters obviously advocating his solidarity with the people. Naturally, the hardcore contents of his posters caused him a lot of trouble. The opportunity for him to join exhibitions with senior artists became wasted because his posters were always subjected to the censorship of the security apparatus, the organizing committee, even his fellow exhibitor artists. It was deemed that Athonk's work would jeopardize the exhibition. As a strategy, Athonk often displayed his censored work on the exhibition's announcement board. He also displayed these posters in the street on many occasions, for the public eye. These posters, however, brought him not only hardships, but also love. Laine Berman, a linguistic anthropologist, studying Javanese language and conducting participant observation as high-ranking court servant (*abdi dalem*) in the Yogya palace (*kraton*), fell

in love with him through one of these posters displayed in the street. They got married.⁹

His first comic book, *Bad Times Stories*, was published in 1994. This comic was circulated from person to person, and was multiplied by photocopying it in 50 copies. Athonk has forgotten how much time he has copied his first comic. This is not to count the copies made by other people for their own collection or for sale. Even though Athonk does not turn down people who want to buy his comics, he mostly gives away his comics free of charge.

Athonk moved from Yogya to Jakarta for 2 years and made a living as a tattoo artist. Due to mismanagement, the business was wound up. Laine received an offer to teach in Melbourne, Australia. Athonk followed his wife 6 months later. Melbourne turned out to be very suitable for Athonk because there is an independent comic community. His comics—at that time ‘*Bad Times Stories 2*’ completed in 3 months—received a warm reception. Athonk started to attract fans. Athonk used to put his comics on sale at bookstores to be sent to independent comics distributors in the United States and Europe. Athonk became a member of this comic’s artist community, and they met periodically.

While in Melbourne, Laine received an offer to teach at the University of Hawaii. As usual, Athonk, too, followed 6 months later. There was no independent comics community there. Underground or independent comics were not to be found at arts campuses that usually circulate them. Athonk had to go through a more stringent procedure if he wanted to entrust his comic books at local bookstores. Athonk eventually concentrated on creating new comics on his experiences to that date. He created the ‘old skull’ character, a man cov-

ered with tattoos with the face of a skull, depicting himself.

Comic’s work and contents

Athonk’s posters and comics are full of texts, made in detail using ballpoint pen. However, there is a clear visual presentation distinction among Athonk’s posters and comics. The size of Athonk’s posters is large, with the average height of one meter and average width of 65 cm. His posters are in color, drawn on paper all using drawing ballpoint pens of many different colors. While Athonk’s posters are loaded with social themes, Athonk’s tattoo art is very much concerned with various traditional ornaments. While Athonk’s poster art is very closely oriented towards the underprivileged Indonesian people, his tattoo art is also sold to tourists, in addition to being oriented to local tattoo fans.¹⁰

Athonk’s comics are made on one page of regular HVS paper, during 1–2 months, using boxy ballpoint pen directly, or by drawing a sketch first using pencil. At the time multiplication using photocopy machine, Athonk decreases the size to half of the original size. Athonk is avoiding traditional designs in comics. On the other hand, he is trying to present universal graphics and symbols, in order to enable readers from all over the world to enjoy them. For the same reason, he is using the English language, even the more so as it is more difficult for him to choose Indonesian language context suitable for the stories and all readers of comics in Indonesia.¹¹

¹⁰ At the time he lived in Melbourne and Hawaii, he opened a tattoo shop. In Hawaii he obtained license from the American Red Cross (ARC), as a requirement to work in this field.

¹¹ Formal Bahasa Indonesia would be too rigid, whereas the use of informal everyday life language would refer to a specific ethnic group.

⁹ Laine saw a poster, and then asked who its author was. Athonk was not there at the time, and then Laine ‘conducted a research’. They met and fell in love.

He is using the ‘*Sosro (wijayan)*’ English in his work, of course with erroneous structure compared to the correct English language. It happened once that Laine, who had already been living with him, corrected the language of his comics several times while Athonk was asleep, but when he woke up, Athonk would get angry and would rewrite everything into its original form. He insists that the *Sosro* English is the context of his comics that cannot be changed.¹² In addition to translation, Athonk is using popular phrases from rock songs.¹³ In Athonk’s view, rock’n roll music is one of his greatest inspirations.

Such a naïve use of the English language has become a special appeal to the fans of Athonk’s comics overseas. Ironically, such simple language makes his comics completely incomprehensible (in some parts, Athonk even uses words in Bahasa Indonesia). Since the third edition, Laine has been making introductions explaining about the context of the language of Athonk’s comics. The frequent use of rock’n roll terms makes it easy for people who have grown up in the popular culture to understand Athonk’s humor and messages. Some Western comic artists have even made several parodies of Athonk’s work focusing on his use of language.

Athonk is using thick and powerful lines. Except for angelic characters, almost none of the objects are left to be plain white. Shading in has the effect of strengthening existing lines. In addition to a classical impression, black and white is chosen by him to emphasize the mes-

sage to be conveyed.¹⁴

There is a great deal of rough shading in or black blocks in his work. Such blocks, according to Athonk, are his strategy to fill in the blanks, because a graphic with too much white does not look good to the eye.

Athonk’s revolt in his comics is not as ‘verbal’ as in his posters. Athonk’s posters are focused on a series of specific cases, such as the Kedungombo case, or the plan to build the Muria Nuclear Power Plant. At the same time, Athonk’s comics (Bad Times Stories 1 and 2) do not refer to specific cases. However, the contest of his stories clearly presents the issue of freedom against authoritarianism. He starts off his second comic with an excerpt from the Old Testament, Psalms, verse 69:

*Biarlah nama-nama mereka dihapuskan dari buku orang-orang yang hidup, dan biarlah mereka tidak termasuk daftar dari orang-orangmu.*¹⁵

The three satan characters have been made to resemble one another, however they are clearly distinguished from the angel characters chasing them. In the story, the three satans are struggling to save themselves and escape from the angels chasing them. The angels’ mission as confirmed by the excerpt from the verse above —is obvious: to destroy the satans.

In the first book the three satans are chased out of the seabed to an island by one of the angels. At the end of the first book, this angel falls into a trap and is painted black by the three satans. Unwillingly, the angel becomes one of the satans, even though he still has wings and

¹² Athonk does not mind translation. According to him, his work can be translated into either formal Bahasa Indonesia or English language, but he is aware that such change in context would diminish the message or the humor considerably.

¹³ For example, ‘Seek and Destroy’ is the song of the band ‘Metallica’, ‘Appetite for Destruction’ is the album of Guns’n Roses, and ‘Fade to Black’ is the song of the Rolling Stones.

¹⁴ This choice to use black and white is emphasized in the sub-title of his two comics: Bad Times Stories 1 with the subtitle: ‘The Endless Warfare of Black and White’, and part 2 with the subtitle: ‘Pure Black Looking Clear’.

¹⁵ Translation of ‘May their names be erased from the book of the living, may they not be included in the list of your people.’

therefore he can still fly. In part two, the four of them defend themselves against an army of angels attacking them in a rage. When they finally have a chance to take refuge in heaven, the angel guarding heaven refuses to take them in (including the unfortunate angel) because they are 'black' and 'different'.

There is only one linear action taking place, in book one. In book two, the scene of four satans on the island is made parallel to the preparations being made by angels in heaven to destroy them. As is generally the case with stories written in the spirit of post-modernism, there are a great number of digressions from the main story with expressions or jokes not directly related, even though these may still be related in some way to the theme of the story.

The existence and repression of satans is the main message of this story. Blocking them in black ink must destroy the satans, whereas the chasing angels that are great in number are left to be white. In addition to the clear order to the angels to destroy the satans, there is a scene when the satans arrive at the gates of heaven. The angel guarding heaven rejects them because they are satans and they are black. When the angels' army is assigned to destroy the satans, the 'general' of angel's orders complete destruction using all ammunition available. All of these are symbols of militarism characteristic of the New Order (please see graphic 1).

The symbol of repression also appears in the figures of stone statue heads such as on the Easter Island and Poso, Central Sulawesi. These statues appear with the face of painter Salvador Dali, the follower of surrealism. These statues are represented in a militaristic figure, complete with the star symbol on their foreheads (see graphic 2). Jokingly, Athonk says that the choice of Dali's repressive figure is the symbol of his father by the name of Dalijo. However, Athonk then says that the

choice of Dali's figure is more representative of the Yogya artist community many of whom are the followers of the school of surrealism. In their time, the Yogya artist community often refused to display Athonk's work in joint exhibitions.

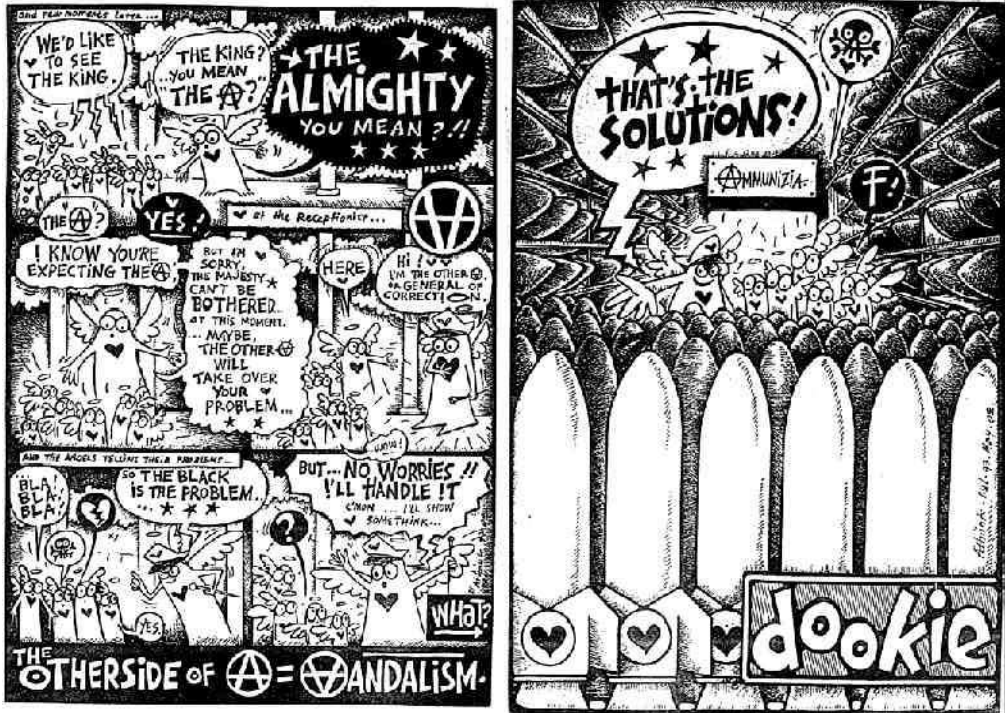
Athonk's attitude about Dali appears to be ambiguous. As he stated in an interview with him:

Aku suka Dali, juga suka sama patung-patung itu. ...Sebenarnya (aku) nggak begitu suka Dali. Bosen juga. Kalau ditanya lebih dalam, ya memang bosen, karena udah terlalu banyak. Masih banyak seniman lain yang lebih bagus daripada dia. Jadi, (aku) pilih Dali itu karena pada waktu itu (Dali) terlalu mendominasi dunia seni rupa di Indonesia. Tahun '80-'90 itu 'kan semuanya surealisme-surealisme... jadi banyak yang njiplak-njiplak Dali. ... Lukisanku nggak Dali. Hanya di komik. Tapi, itu salah satu bukti bahwa aku seneng Dali juga... ha ha ha....

In part two, Dali statues that are slightly different from the other appear. These have Mohawk haircut just like Athonk, and there are three drawers on the body of each of them with the symbols of the 1997 general election, namely the star, the banyan tree and the bull's head. Each drawer is used by the satan to protect himself from the attack by the angels' army. Again, he takes the bodies with drawers from Dali's paintings from 1936 to 1938 (see Graphics 2 and 3). The drawers depict an analogy of the human body. For Dali, drawers are places where people keep and lock up their personality (Néret 2000:42–45).¹⁶

Athonk lets his readers interpret the meaning of these symbols themselves. However, his efforts to co-relate the three participants of the general election during the New Order with the symbol of repressiveness are quite obvious. The Mohawk haircut and the Elvis Presley style

¹⁶ Dali who was greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud is of the opinion that only the Freudian psychoanalysis has the keys to open up those drawers.



Graphic 1: The angel's general ordering total annihilation using missiles

in one of the statues symbolize Athonk himself (see Graphic 2). In addition to the issue of repressive ness, the New Order has the characteristics of absurdness, and ambiguous standards of right-wrong and good-bad categories. Athonk visually symbolizes these categories through good and evil characters that all have the halo graphic, a circle above their heads. Halo is usually used to symbolize the sanctity of a person in paintings with ancient Greek and Christian themes.

Selected distribution and prospects thereof

Athonk admits he does not like the concept of copyright. To him, copyright is not applied,

as it should be in Indonesia. He chooses to work independently to ensure he has the freedom to work. He also chooses to publish his comics 'under ground' in order to reach his targeted market segment: underground comic fans overseas. In fact, there are quite a large number of underground comic fans in Indonesia. Unfortunately, the scope of their circulation is limited to art student circles. The choice of Sosrowijayan English, and the great number of expressions taken from rock music of which Athonk is a fan, indicate that in addition to meeting the challenge of the international market, this choice of language is also still his personal expression.

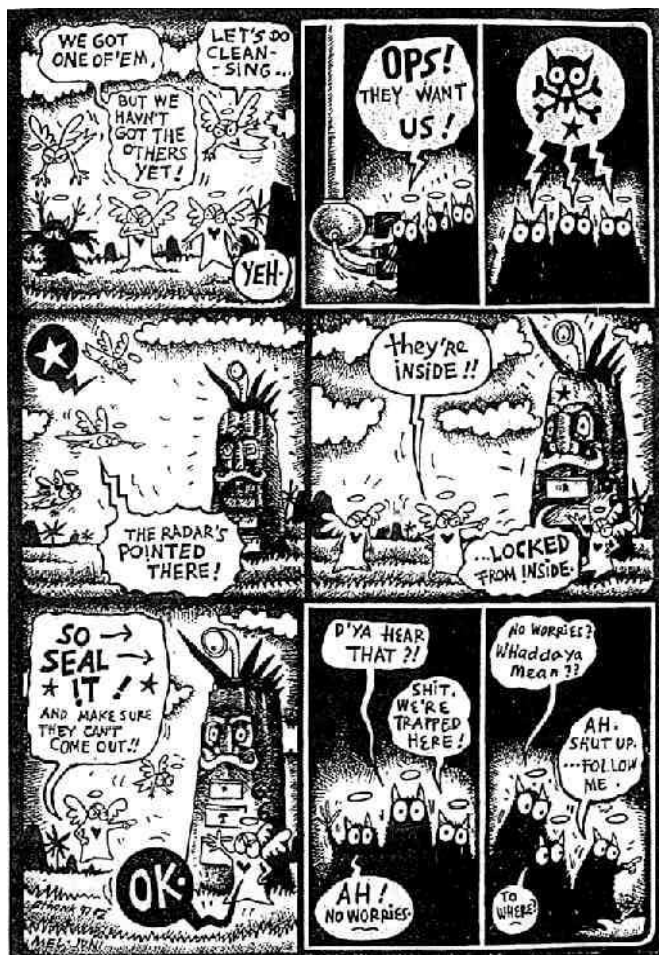
While Athonk lived in Melbourne, he real-



graphic 2: Political party drawers, Mohawk symbol and New Order militarism

ized that underground comic circle network there was broader than he had expected. The said network has links with similar networks in Europe and the United States. Within a short period of time, Athonk's comics were sold in comic stores in various European countries and in America. One could find Athonk's comics in London, Berlin, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Brooklyn, and New York.

Athonk's comics also entered the internet. The writings of critics of these comics in art magazines appeared—complete with graphic excerpts—on the Internet. Beside that, this couple was actively using the internet to look for materials or for correspondence. They eventually set up their own website on the Internet. Athonk set up a big website explaining about his activities as an artist, including



Graphic 3: The three devils took shelter from the angel's attack! The unlucky angel is left outside. Both the devils and the angels have *halo*, symbolizing ambiguity of 'good-bad' and 'right-wrong' norms.

comics. Athonk has also been actively assisting an Indonesian comic website, and has been diligently writing open letters to Indonesian comic fans who wish to ask any questions at all. On the Internet, Athonk has been positioned as a senior comic artist who is able to answer the questions of fans and younger comic artists. Athonk's comics and name have be-

come popular on the search engine sites on the Internet within a short period of time. He has been receiving an increasing number of orders for comics, especially from overseas.

Commenting on the issue of marketing his comics in Indonesia, Laine thinks that Athonk still needs to create his comics using Bahasa Indonesia. Athonk does not deny the signifi-

cance of this. However, Athonk also reaffirms that it is very difficult to create comics using Bahasa Indonesia. Too many social contexts appear as a consequence of existing alternative language styles. If he used the standard Bahasa Indonesia, his comics would be formal. If he used everyday language, he would face the dilemma of having to choose a certain region's everyday language. The choice of language based on ethnic group would tie his work to a certain ethnic group and a certain social context. Besides, everyday language is developing very rapidly, which causes him a concern that his work would be considered old-fashioned at some point in time.

Expression and representation of Athonk's comics

Even though comics are categorized as a form of the art of the masses, Athonk does not mind if his work is categorized as craftsmanship or 'low art'. To him, the quality of art lies in the idea and the contribution of the work of art itself to society—a specific discourse in one of the social realism fortifications in the Indonesian fine arts. No matter what, Athonk's comics cannot be simply categorized as low art taking sides with public taste, because his work is still a personal expression. The form of graphics, the Sosro English and expressions taken from rock songs are very personal, depicting his personality.

To Athonk, comics are the ideal media. As mentioned above, his other choice of media, namely posters, is also created in small panels and contains a lot of text. The media of comics gives him the opportunity to convey his message more verbally. Athonk stresses that graphics without text are incomplete. The need to verbalize his messages is part of his efforts to decrease the gap between the works of art and readers or viewers. The complimentary distri-

bution of his comics and the placement of his posters on exhibition hall announcement boards and in the street are also part of his efforts to bring his work closer to the public.

Unlike Athonk, the work of his senior artists at ISI voice social disparity issues or criticism of development with messages more tend to be packaged in symbols (Moelyono 1997:1–6).¹⁷

Furthermore, the beginning of the emergence of artists with high education in fine arts was marked with the priority of choice of their graduates of 'high art' forms, such as painting, modern sculpturing and design art, namely interior design, graphic design and product design with clearer prospects for income. They generally came from upper-middle class families, professional families, and wealthy businessmen families. Lower-middle classes were not included in the selection of such high educational institutions of this kind. This was the cause of their reluctance to engage in categories of works of arts requiring physical effort. They were also reluctant to live below the middle-class standard (Moelyono 1997:17–18).

The spirit of revolt, freedom of speech and expression caused Athonk's comics to become very political. Emerged at about the culmination of the political crisis in Indonesia, the political discourse also made his comics become artifacts with a high level of appeal for foreign observers. Athonk got his inspiration from his political activities. He normally requires one month to forge his idea for story. He does not structure the story beforehand. He draws the idea of the most developed part of the story in his head.

¹⁷ In this part Moelyono (1997) criticizes Dede Eri Supria who, according to him, does not understand properly the small people that he is defending.

Esthetically, Athonk finds more pleasure in *Bad Times Stories 2*. A longer period of time in the creative process produces a lengthier story (part 1 is about 16 pages long and part 2 is as long as 32 pages). The graphics are also more attractive. However, the rough lines that according to many critics are so characteristic of Athonk in bringing a wild impression to the surface and in reestablishing him as a form of art of the 'outskirts' are increasingly diminishing. The shading in part 2 is softer. Athonk admits that the long periods of time in Melbourne helped him develop in a better direction.

Athonk has chosen Independence and underground distribution due to his need to do creative work, due to the lack of hope in the Indonesian comic industry, and as part of his protest of society that is unable to accept differences. His self-confidence to lift the shell of the local comic industry and introduce his work to the international world grew from his experience living in an international environment. In addition to having lived for a rather long time in one of the tourist districts in Yogyakarta, his wife's presence contributed to building such spirit.

Athonk's success comes from his originality and personality that have been accepted by the specific 'market' all over the world. The expression of his comics emerges as representation of his experiences since childhood forming a characteristic (Indonesian?) identity: anti-militarism, capitalism and communism. As indicated on the inner cover of his latest comic. Speaking about self-identity, Athonk describes himself as an oppressed Javanese boy living in the global village. The issue of tug-of-war among national-local-global identity global appears as the main topic of his comics. This gives his work a strong character, and to the liking of comic readers from other cultural contexts who reject the assumption

that the distribution level of a work of art compares reversal to the quality of its discourse. On the contrary, this is an indication that regardless of the form of a work of art, it always depends on the appropriate distribution tactics to sell it to the targeted market segment.

Conclusion

An expressive and personal work of art does not necessarily have to fail on the market. Even though the Indonesian comic industry is not developing, Indonesian comics are still alive and are making progress in their own way. Athonk's choice of independent production style is his struggle to be able to express himself freely. The strategy of choosing 'underground' distribution is a materialization of his spirit to continue spreading his work without having to depend on the local comic industry that is practically dead at the moment. His success—in the context of Indonesian comics—is his ability to remain productive producing original and independent works, representing the social-political conditions from his point of view.

The choice of comic is a 'low art' choice according to the traditional Western fine art theory. However, to him, this form does not keep a distance with the people, and it is effective for conveying his thoughts. The definition of comics as form of low art or art of the masses is not at all relevant. At the present time, the measure of success of a work of art lies in the ability of such work of art to communicate with its consumers. The need to create works of art that stand close to the people; and the form and messages of comics created by Athonk appear as the representation of his life experience, social-political conditions of the society at a given point in time, and the long history of Indonesia fine arts. Even though traditional arts greatly influence other

forms of his art (e.g. tattoo), Athonk's comics tend to bring out his universal ideas. All of the above become the combination of creating a unique and strong work. It has been proven that with a strong distribution concept, its market segment has accepted this work favorably.

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