

Indonesian Comic Book Artist in the World

by: Tito Imanda

The Comic Book

Comics, for Scott McCloud, is “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”¹ However, everyday understanding see comics as pictures with written stories. Comic arts in certain places have certain styles. For instance, American and European comics have stable storytelling with great attention to the reader’s logic. Japanese comics, or *manga*, tell the story with more feelings from ambience images. American comic industries more concentrate on short stories serials and European comics almost always have long adventures. All of these differences came from long traditions in comics and visual arts, within each region cultural contexts.

Indonesian comics’ traditions believed to begin from the existence of relief in Javanese old hindunese temples. Those relief absolutely fit to the McCloud’s definition on comic above, but modern Indonesian comics have not appear untill after independence, after while cooping with comic strips, newspaper caricatures, and propaganda posters in Japanese and Dutch colonial times. Then, newspapers published translated strips from Europe or America, and translated comic books were flooding the market. Those works have very strong effect, so any works could have locals influenced with them. No wonder if Indonesian modern comics art style and storytelling are more influenced by western comic’s traditions.²

In ‘*Imagined Communities*’, from the 50’s Indonesian cases Ben Anderson pictured how comics represented common people thoughts and feelings about their leaders,³ and the 60’s is the first chance for Indonesian leaders to show their thoughts about comics. President Soekarno, who was much anti western then, accused comic artists of subversion, denounced these works as garbage and ‘western poison’. After that, schools and comic kiosks were raided and comic books were burned. After breathing a while and reach their ‘the golden age of Indonesian comics’ in Suharto era, comics were again attacked in the end of 70’s for fostering laziness and having no educational value for children.⁴

Indonesian comic books in mid 60’s to 70’s based their distributions on rental kiosks. As mentioned before, it was the best time for Indonesian comics, like Laine Berman explain:

During this time, a brilliant scheme for evading the problem of economic difficulty appeared through the comic rental kiosk, which blossomed throughout Java... . Many Indonesians have described for me their memories of that time through images of people sitting under trees beside the huge piles of comics they had just borrowed from the rental kiosk! As popular culture, then, the comic book is highly valued by locals who seem more than prepared to become entirely involved in these often epic narratives.

Today, Indonesian comic industry is fallen apart. One of the leader of Gramedia group, as one of Indonesian biggest publisher group and have many comic products, said that now imported comic books is their biggest selling products and 90 percents of it is from Japan. Not just the substance competition, the high costs for local comic production process made them choose to buy cheaper publish right for these imported comic books.⁵ To add to these problems, the complicated procedure to get a publish permit from government in the Suharto era just made publisher turn their head even more to imported comics.

Outside the industry, independent comic production came from two main sources: art school students and non-governmental organization activist. Ones from art school are the most limited to distribute. These comics are weird, with just a little story, tend to pornography (pornography is illegal in Indonesia), but explore imagination and art possibilities, from it’s graphics and storytelling. The creators of these kinds of comics are still many in Indonesia, but they usually stop doing it after they graduate and find other work. Activist comics are very different, even though the it’s artists are usually also an art school student. These kinds of comics usually funded by particular institution to spread social issues to society.⁶ In distribution, independent comics are published informally, and it known by the term

'underground'. Included to this kind are independent comic artists who publish their comic themselves, with the name of individual or informal group, not with particular official institutions.

Indonesian Art History

Traditional western art history discipline distinguished art as high and low art. In fine art high art is limited, exclusive work of art consumed by certain people from certain social class like European sculptures and paintings, while low art is massive, popular work like kitsch or crafts, believed being produced and consumed not with hard efforts and difficult thinking processes. This view was challenged as considered ethnocentric, since any artwork from outside Europe with different context would be taken as low art.⁷

The first and second generations of Indonesian painters were educated by western style and techniques, so they followed Western criteria on high and low art. It needed other twenty years to build national consciousness on traditional fine art. Not until 1965, with emerging of the art school graduate, Indonesian artists were using motives, symbols, and subjects related with local traditional culture.⁸

Indonesian art history was always colored by conflicts between two polar artists. At one side are artists with orientation to individual expression with financial compensation glued together. At the other side, artists with orientation to spirit of the society: to portrait the society reality, to send the messages to and making the society a part of production and distribution processes. From frictions between *Mooi Indië* artist with Persagi,⁹ the differences style specialization in the beginning of art schools,¹⁰ Manikebu versus Lekra artists,¹¹ to the time of art gallery booming opposed by 'anti new order status quo' artists, this conflicts significantly formed Indonesian art history and expressed in many art form.

In Suharto's era, the stability of economic growth became main priority. Jakarta Art Institute with an art center was built in 1968 in Jakarta to add accesses to public art space. Art gallery and exhibition centers were growing, and artists were getting more prosper. But people daily lives were under repression of military regime, and art for people, or art that criticized government policies were illegal. Bandung's Western art style banned in 1960's under the Lekra's influenced was free –even adopted also by Yogya artists in 1970's- but just only because the abstract and surrealism relatively sterile from politics.

So the new art movement emerge. With economic and information globalization before the end of 1980's, there was student and young artists movement opened their own forum in unexpected places. These artists rejected fine art brands, elitism and art over-materialism. They used daily street media: poster art, comics, installation, graffiti, street performing, stickers and T-shirt designs. For artists really care for poor people, these street interactions are more direct through their protests.¹²

Athonk and his life

Athonk is the youngest from 5 children, born in 1971. They lived in Semarang, at Kaliungu area. His father was a policeman, and educated his children hardly. Like the Javanese traditional relationship between father and son, the relation between Athonk and his father has been very formal. They are Christian Advent, and from a little child Athonk got religion education, also hardly. Athonk older brother went to ISI and chosen sculpture to be his media. Athonk other siblings have chosen more normal choices to live, accountant or priest.

Other than father's salary, the family also tried to get extra income from making ice from family's freezer. Little Athonk, about 6 years old, often got task to sell the ice around. They also opened books and comics rental, and Athonk grew up reading those, draw his own comics, and borrowed and circulated between friends.¹³ Little Athonk grew with extraordinary talents, so his parents were never stop him to read comics.

Beside that, there was a well-known caricaturist community in neighborhood, formed by one of the closest neighbor called Itos. Itos trained local youth to make caricature fulfill the Jakarta newspaper and magazine standard. Athonk said that he never learn to draw to Itos, especially since caricature doesn't require good drawings. However he grew up with this

community, was close to Itos, and more or less got inputs, especially about implications on media choices with copyright.

From he was child Athonk just loved 50's rock'n roll music like Elvis Pressley. He also loved and followed other music influenced by rock'n roll like hard rock, heavy metal, punk, etc. At the Junior High School, for the first time he cut his hair with Mohawk style, a punker style taken from an American Indian traditional hairstyle. Since the college time, his style was completely punkers with chains and leather boots attributes. Not a real punker, he said that these looks were part of his protest to political situation and intolerant society.

At 1990 Athonk went to ISI Yogyakarta, and he was introduced to theory and history of art. Even he got lots of theory and discussion there; he disappointed to lecturer's quality and reference. At the time he rent a room in Yogya, and a house in Sosrowijayan area, near the Yogyakarta's tourist center. He had many connections with tourists and people correlate with it. Around this time he introduced to tattoo art, and got his first tattoo, a Donald Duck face in his right arm. Soon he also became an activist, and at his time Indonesian student movement emerged more militant, organized, and dealt more with common people interests. Athonk's art and activity got more and more involved to meetings, demos, advocating acts, ngo's, and of course, authority. One of his posters was picked by police once, thankfully returned after awhile. He arrested by police and/or army several times more. In 1996, when he showed up in a demo in Jakarta, he get arrested and electrified for 4 days in an intelligence agent office. Around the time, he got expelled from school.

Athonk masterpiece's emerged around that time. He made lots of poster arts, filled by small drawings and writings –looks like panels in comic books. His posters, every one of them shows his position with people's interest, made by months, even a year. Substances of his posters, surely, cause him trouble. Opportunity to involve in exhibition with senior artists got him nowhere since his posters were censored before by police, exhibition organizer or even other artists to secure the rest of exhibitors. As tricks, many times Athonk hang his censored posters in the exhibition building's public board. In other times he also just hang his posters in the sidewalk so anyone could see it. And his posters were not only causing him trouble. His wife, Laine Berman, linguistic anthropologist studying Javanese at the time as royal servant in Keraton Yogya (Palace), fell in love with him because a poster in sidewalk.¹⁴

His first comic book, *Bad Times Stories*, published in 1994. This comic reproduced by photocopy, and circulated from hand to hand. One edition, as Athonk named one time he goes to copy center, he made 50 copies of it. Untill now Athonk forget how many times he copy his first comic book, not to count other people copy for personal collection or to resale. Even Athonk will accept anybody wants to buy his comic books, more often he just give those for free.

From Yogya, Athonk lived in Jakarta for 2 years. He made money there being a tattoo artist. Hands, legs, and his necks were full of tattoos then. There he ran a tattoo parlor named 'Kupu-kupu', placed in elite area at Southern Jakarta, oriented to high class. Beside tattoo, 'Kupu-kupu' also had beautiful and café. Not to long, by many organizational disorders, the place closed. Laine got offer to teach from a university in Melbourne, Australia, and Athonk followed her 6 month later.

Melbourne turned out a very good place for Athonk, since they had a big independent comic community. Soon Athonk became part of that community, and they made routine meeting annually. His comic books, -at the time '*Bad Times Stories 2*' was finished in 3 months- got a warm welcome, and Athonk started to get fans. Athonk used to put his comic books to be sale in bookstore, and from the place they sent to independent comic circulators to Europe and US.

From Melbourne, Laine got other offer to teach in University of Hawaii, and like before, Athonk followed 6 months later. Too bad, there was no independent comic community. Even no underground or independent comic in art schools. When Athonk try to put his comic books in local bookstore, he had to face more tight procedures. So here Athonk concentrate to make a new comic serial about his experiences, especially abroad. He made '*old skull*' character, a guy full of tattoo with skull head, as representation of himself.

Art and the Content

Athok's poster arts comic books and tattoo are both similar and different. The first two are made detail with draw pen and full of writings. However there is big visual presentation differences between those two. Athok's poster arts are huge, with approximately 1-meter height and 65 cm width. They were colored, made on paper entirely with colored draw pen. Athok comic books, like his preferences in tattoo, are just using black ink. If the poster art full with social themes, his tattoo have more concern to traditional motives. If the poster art directed as close as possible to common Indonesian people, his tattoo art and comic books are addressed particularly to 'International people', with different ways. Traditional motives supposed to attract tourist and westerner looking for something exotic, the comic books tried to be understandable by anyone can read English.

Every page of his comic book were made in a day work with common A4 paper, sometimes with pencils first, but more often directly with ballpoint pen. In reproduction processes, he reduced the size to half. Athok avoids traditional design, concentrating in universal symbols so anybody in the world could enjoy his work. The other reason for him was there are too many contexts in Indonesian language, and choosing one could limit the possibilities of readers there.¹⁵

The comic books were made with 'Sosro(wijayan)', Yogyanese English with many structural mistakes all over. Several times Laine improved the English text while Athok was sleeping, but when he woke up he angry and changed it back. He insisted that Sosro English is his comic books context that can not be replaced.¹⁶ Beside the language, he also uses much of popular phrases from rock'n roll music.¹⁷ For him, rock n'roll is the biggest inspiration.

These naïve English draws big appeals to underground comic fans abroad. However, since these simple language often ungraspable (many times he used Indonesian words and contexts), since the third edition Laine made foreword explaining the language contexts. The uses of rock'n roll terms, on the other side make easier for people familiar with that. Some parody of Athok's work has made by western comic artists focusing on his languages.

Athok's lines are thick and heavy. Except the angel characters, he let almost no object blank white. Shades and renders strengthen these lines. Besides making classic impression, black and white used to stress the messages.¹⁸ There are so many rough renders or black block there. These blocks are his strategy to fill the emptiness, since for him, white blanks are not good to look at (see figure 2).

Athok's rebellions in comic books are not as verbal as his posters. His posters stressed on specific cases or contexts, like nuclear generate power plant plan in Madura or land problem in central Java. His comic books (Bad times Stories 1&2) are not related to specific cases, but still deal with problems on repression. He opened his second book with a quotation from Old Testament, David 69: "*May their names be erased from the book of the living, may they not be included in the list of your people*". The story is about 3 little black devil, and one black angel as protagonists, being chased by white angel troops. The angel mission, like Athok had stated with the quotation, is to destroy all black devils.

The 3 devils general characters were made alike, but different with hunting angels. In the first book, there is only one linear story about the 3 devil chased from sea into an island by an angel. At end, the angel trapped and painted black by the devils, made him into one of them even he still have his wings, able to fly. In the second book, story on four of them at the island paralleled with squadron of angels' preparation to hunt and destroy them, finished with the 3 devils cover themselves from squadron of angels attacking them violently. At end they have opportunity to get cover in heaven, the guard angel refuses them since they are black and different. Like any postmodern storytelling, there are many distractions on the main story with words or jokes directly unrelated to it.

Difference and repression to it is the main message in the story. Devils were black blocked by ink, and hunting angels were blank white. Beside clear order to vanish the devil, there is a scene when the 3 devils get to heaven's gate and the guardian angel refuse them because they are black. When the angel squadron are about to send to hunt the devils, the angel general orders total annihilation with all rudals available. All of these, of course, are representation of intolerant Soeharto's military regime (see figure 3)

Repression Symbols are also shown in stonehead figures like ones in Easter Island and Poso, Central Sulawesi. Those statues appear with Salvador Dali's face, and militaristic figures full of stars attributes in their foreheads (see figure 4). Jokingly Athonk stated that the Dali's choice is representation of his father, whose name was Dalijo. But then he said that it more represent Yogyakarta's artist community in his Yogya times, with surrealism as their main style. Many times, then, those artists refused Athonk's rebellious work to appear in their exhibition, for they worried authorities would ban whole exhibition.¹⁹

There were two Dali's figures that different from others in part two. One has mohawk haircut like Athonk, and the body has 3 drawers with symbols of 3 1997's Indonesian general election contestant: a star, a *beringin* (*vicus penyamina*) tree and a bull's head. Each drawer is used by a devil to hide from angel's attack. Body with drawers, again, was taken from Dali's work between 1936-1938 (see figure 8). Drawers represent human brain, that Dali seen as a place for people to put and lock their personalities.²⁰ Here, Athonk seems try to represent Indonesian political system with political party as it's characters. The funny thing is once the devil get into these 3 separate drawers, there is just one space inside, as no difference anybody would get with picking one contestant in election then. Elections in Soeharto's era were always mentioned as 'the greatest democratic festival', but no matter what always won with huge percentage –and huge manipulation- by Soeharto's party, the second contestant with tree symbol, Golkar. Even the other party was controlled by him and functioned just to legitimize all of parliament's decision. Mohawk and –another figure with- Elvis Pressley's hairstyle are representation of Athonk himself, as also inseparated part of Indonesia (see figure 5 and 6).

For Athonk, no clear standard on what is right and wrong or what is good and bad are common condition in Soeharto's era. In part 2, the repressive Dali figure are used by 3 devils to get cover. Subtitle in part one said 'the war between black versus white, good versus evil' (word 'good' were put under 'black' and 'evil' under 'white'). The devils, the story's protagonist were pictured cute and sweet. However, eventhough look a little fierce when they are hunting the devils, the angels were pictured more cute and sweet. All characters have *halo* light ring above their head. *Halos* usually were put above holy figure in traditional religious Christian artwork. For these, Laine jokingly said Athonk was just playing postmo and deconstructive. Athonk just smile then.

Distribution and the possibilities

Athonk doesn't like concept on copyright, especially since in Indonesia copyright concept run in the different way. He chose to work independently to get full freedom. His choice of language and in underground publishing were made to get his market, international underground comic fans. Focusing in local underground comic fans will not get enough number of readers he wished. However, beside that orientation, the uses of Sosro language and rock'n roll terms show that languages he uses are still his personal expression.

Laine got contract to teach in Melbourne between 1996-1997. Athonk join her, and start to put his comic books to local bookstores. Local underground comic network found these comics right away, and asks Athonk to join their meetings. This network turned out to be wider than it appeared, since they have connections to similar network in Europe and US. Not to long, Athonk's comics were available in bookstores there. People found Athonk's comic books in London, Berlin, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and New York.

Athonk's comics were also get into internet. Critic's writings about these comic books in art magazines were put online, full with some graphics. Beside that, the couple themselves were active using internet to get material and correspondent, and finally, they made their own sites. Then Athonk made huge sites about his art activities, including comics. Athonk also has been active helping an Indonesian comic sites, and corresponds to anyone asking anything. Here, he has been positioned as one of senior able to answer questions from fans or younger comic artists. In short time Athonk got more requests for the comic books.

However, Laine still see the importance for Athonk to make comic books with Indonesian language to get more local fans, and Athonk couldn't argued on that. On the same time he stated that making comic with Indonesian language is a bit harder for him. There are

too many styles with specific contexts. Beside, rapid changing of everyday language, making him worried that his works will be seemed out of date very soon.

Expression and representation

Even comics are categorized to low art, Athonk don't feel bothered because for him, qualities of an artwork are constituted by what its relation to the whole society: a discourse typically belongs to one polar of Indonesian art movement. However, his comic works could not be categorized easily to low art since it is still a personal expression. Drawform, Sosro English and idioms from rock music represent his personality.

For Athonk, comic book is an ideal media. Beside his childhood-comic-related-background, comics allowed him to more verbally saying his messages. Like already mentioned, his poster arts are also drawn by small panels and have so many writings. Athonk stressed that images without writings are not yet complete. He needs to verbalize the messages to narrowed distance between his artwork and the viewers/readers, like decisions to free-circulated his comic books and placing his poster outside of exhibition buildings and sidewalks.

The central theme on freedom of expression has giving political tension to this comic, make it highly attractive especially since it made around the peak of Indonesian political crisis. Political freedom and changed over time and in Athonk's early college time, even government repression to any people political movement were still very strong, accumulation on needs for freedom produced more militant and organized student movement. Advantaged by government lost of control on new mass media industry and general globalization, students got more ways to actualize their actions. In this era, art took a very big part; art students and activists had many events on the streets, together with bigger demonstration. Street art demo actions were believed would have more interactions with people they fight for.²¹

Not like Athonk, artworks produced by his seniors from ISI have more 'indirect' approach to their messages. They lived long enough under repressive regime, so even if they try to say something about social imbalance or political impropriety, they would do it with symbols.²² More further, if the early Indonesian 'academics' artists chose high art forms like painting or sculpture, the economic and sterile politic oriented Soeharto's era made academics have more industrial interest, like graphic, interior, and product design. They usually come from upper middle class family, since people from lower middle class are not able to afford the fees. This background rationalized their unwillingness to involve in forms of art that require them to spend more energy and risk the middle class living.²³

Athonk develop his story within a month. Not making any structure before, he just drew the most fixed part in his mind. Aesthetically, he more satisfied with *Bad Times Stories* 2. He came up with a longer story (part 1 approximately 16 pages, and the second part 32 pages), and more planned graphics. However, he got less and less rough lines and shading identified his work as a 'street art'. Part 2 shadings are more soft (see figure 8). Athonk said that longer time to plan and staying in Melbourne help him developed to better direction.

Independent and underground distribution were chose part because the unreliability of Indonesian comic industry, part to get freedom of expression, and part as his protest to the intolerance society. These choices and using English had opened his opportunity to the world market, especially for independent and underground comic fans. All of these choices developed by living in international environment, from Yogya tourist area and having an American linguistic anthropologist wife.

Athonk had successfully put his comic books accepted by a specific 'market' in the world with still have an original and personal expression. His expression appeared as representation of his specific experiences begins from his childhood. It formed a specific (Indonesia?) political identity: anti-militarism, capitalism, and communism like what he had written inside his latest comic book back cover. It also formed his identity as repressed Javanese boy, or a simple guy living in a global village. Since the fans love it very much, it is in a way argued assumptions that a success distribution does not get along with its discourse quality. On a contrary, it shows that no matter how good is an art form, a well-planned distribution tactics will sell it to its desired market.

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¹ McCloud, 1993, p 9.

² Berman, 1998, p 19.

³ Anderson, 1990, p 156-173. Comic is people’s media on symbolized political communication, and monument is the ruler’s media.

⁴ Berman, Op cit.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ There are so much of these kinds of comic books in 1990’s. See Berman, 2000.

⁷ Beside, this view will have difficulties on study modern-multimedia art form. See Mirzoeff, 1999, p 23. See also Pirous, 1997.

⁸ Spanjaard, 1998a, p 44. About Indonesian artists attached to their traditions, see also Esmeralda & Mare Bollandsee, 1987, and Iwan Pirous, 1997; Pirous show modernism reflection of Indonesian fine art is something with more appreciation to traditional values.

⁹ Purnomo, 1998, p 13. Lihat juga Kusnadi, 1998a, and Wisetrotomo, 1998, p 58-59, and Sudjojono, 2000, p 1-8.

¹⁰ Spanjaard, 1998b and 1998c, p 62-65 and 64-65. Even Bandung and Yogya School spirit belongs to different polarities, it creates intensive dialogues, especially in 1970’s. See Spanjaard, 1998c, p 65.

¹¹ Lekra was an artist organization affiliated to Indonesian Communist Party, banned in 1965.

Manikebu funded as reaction to Lekra, to support universalism in art. See Dermawan, 1998, p 58-59. However even some senior Yogyakarta artists like Hendra Gunawan and Henk Ngantung join LEKRA, not every people-oriented artist joins it.

¹² Berman, 1999, p 75. Here street includes any public open space: neighbourhood, plantation, factory frontyard, public message board, or religious area. See also Moelyono, 1997.

¹³ Berman, 1995.

¹⁴ Laine saw one of the posters, and asked about the painter. Athonk was not there, and Laine traced him down. They met and falling in love to each other.

¹⁵ Formal Indonesian language will be too stiff, and informal everyday languages will be connected to specific ethnic context.

¹⁶ However, Athonk does not mind the translation. He is thinking about translating his comic books to formal Indonesian or English, even though it will diminish many of his messages and humors.

¹⁷ Like “*Seek and Destroy*” is a ‘Metallica’ song, “*Appetite for Destruction*” is ‘Guns’n Roses’ album, and “*Fade to Black*” is a ‘Rolling Stones’ song.

¹⁸ His stressed on black and white choice was pointed on the two comic books sub titles: In *Bad Times Stories* 1: “*The Endless Warfare of Black & White*”, and in the sequel: “*Pure Black Looking Clear*”.

¹⁹ Athonk position on Dali is a little ambiguous: “I like Dali, and I like those sculptures. ... Well actually I don’t like Dali too much. Boring. If you ask me deeper, yes it’s boring because there are too many. So many other great artists (to be idolized). So picked Dali at the time because he dominazed Indonesian fine arts. In 80’s-90’s everybody is surrealist. ... My work is not his. It’s just in the comic (I tried to exposed him). But that’s also the evidence that I like him... ha ha ha...”

²⁰ See Néret, 2000, hal 42-45. Dali who is influenced by Sigmund Freud said that only Freudian Psychoanalist has the key to open those drawers.

²¹ See Berman, 1999.

²² See Moelyono, 1997, 1-6. Like mentioned above, Athonk complained their surrealism orientation.

²³ *Ibid*, 17-18.