

# Art And Political Activism In Indonesia

*During the past decade, changes in Indonesia's political, social, and cultural worlds have been dramatic. The turbulence brought about by the changes, however, inspired artists to make work that has been both bold and thought-provoking. Through the politicization of their art, many groups and individuals have helped to create a climate of activism and an awareness of art that is refreshing.*

By Susan Ingham

**R**endra, the Indonesian poet and dramatist, wrote in his poem of the 1970s, *When criticism comes only through official channels / life is like vegetables without salt...* This was an act of defiance against the then-president Suharto's bureaucracy and its attempts to suppress dissent,<sup>1</sup> but in the last few years of 20th century, with economic crisis, dissent erupted everywhere, Suharto was forced to step down and the "vegetables" became very salty. This time is now known as *Reformasi*, and the visual arts were one significant avenue of dissent.

As with literature, the visual arts had experienced a history of suppression since 1965, initially for any association with left wing and Communist ideologies but eventually as part of dictatorial attempts to control culture and present a benign image of Indonesia under Suharto's New Order. Both literature and the visual arts had to deal with military and police restrictions, although the visual arts were possibly less easily interpreted by the authorities than the written word, and sometimes avoided censorship.<sup>2</sup>

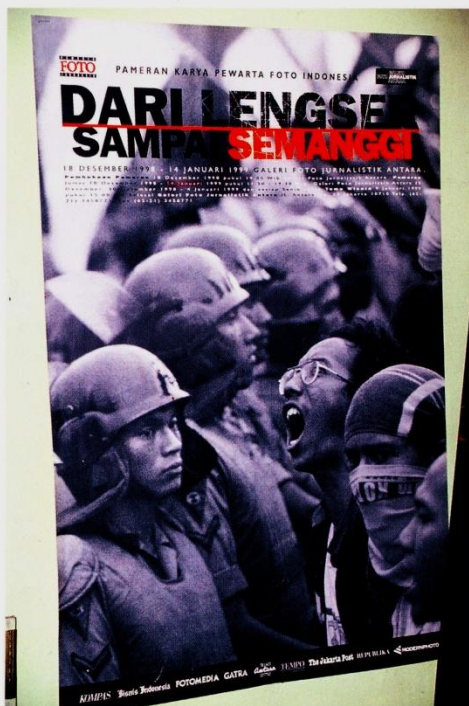
Representational art had the potential to convey criticism of government more clearly to the public than abstract art. As a result, art influenced by Dutch Modernist traditions and art that did not refer to any religious, social, or political issue was generally favored by the cultural bureaucracies, the mainstream galleries, and collectors: the developing art mar-

ket followed suit. Certain artists struggled against this suppression such as the members of *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*, or the New Art Movement, which sought to depict the new, modern Indonesia developing under Suharto's regime. But along with art that made references to psychological tension or depictions of the poor, protest, when expressed, was necessarily oblique. All this came to an end in 1998, and, despite all the subsequent problems boiling in Indonesia, artists really reveled in a freedom of speech not known under Suharto, as the artist Heri Dono said when in Australia recently.<sup>3</sup>

Art intersects with politics in complex and interesting ways, and sometimes even art that was created for no other reason than art-related issues, art that did not refer to any religious, social, or political issue, was, in Indonesia 'political' in its non-political stance because by not criticizing the current regime, it appeared to be supporting it. Sometimes political art is simply an expression of the times, the artist using the tools to hand to participate in events; but at the other extreme political art can be didactic, even though the artist may deny this. In the opinion of the well-known art writer and activist, Lucy

Lippard: "Few labor under the illusion that their art will change the world directly or immediately.... art may not be the best didactic tool available, but it can be a powerful partner to the didactic statement, speaking in its own language (and, incidentally, sneaking subversively into interstices where didacticism and rhetoric can't pass)."<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the style, what-



**Dari Lengser sampai Semanggi (From the resignation (of Suharto) to Semanggi (a demonstration in 1998)).** This poster was photographed in the tiny studio of **Nandang Gawe**, a young Bandung artist. It expresses all the pent-up frustration young activists felt at the time of *Reformasi*. Student demonstrators led the demand for reform but they were themselves targeted by security forces and were abducted and disappeared, that disturbing verb that has turned into a category of person. Suharto's New Order regime collapsed like a house of cards in 1998 in three brief months between February, when the rupiah hit an all-time low against the US dollar, to May, when protest exploded in riots.





Djoko Pekik, poster of **Without Flowers or Condolence Telegram in the year 2000**, 1999, oil.



Indonesia 1998, Berburu Celeng

Djoko Pekik, **Berburu Celeng (Hunting the Boar)**, 1998. Reproduced here as a poster for his exhibition. The original was sold for one billion rupiah, or AU\$200,000, to a private collector in Yogyakarta.

ever the intention expressed by the artist, the urge to raise awareness, alter opinions, 'raise consciousness,' and eventually effect change is, I believe, implicit in political art.

A history of debate surrounds activist and political artwork that resurfaced with *Reformasi*. Such art is evaluated on the basis of its ability to convince its audience, but this audience is not a single, fixed entity and an artwork popular with the general public may not have convinced sections of the art world. This is seen with the work of the group, *Taring Padi*. A political work that is successful in the market and fetches a high price is often considered to have lost integrity, as if its message is contaminated by money. Such issues have surfaced around the recent work of Djoko Pekik, for example. Yet with the multiple ways in which an artwork can travel and be reproduced or reconstituted now, wherever a work ends up, in the home of

an investor or in a public collection, it can have an afterlife. If the artwork is an installation or performance, being ephemeral, the afterlife is vital for the survival of the concept, and this very act of writing about particular works, such as those of F. X. Harsono, Mella Jaarsma, and Tita Rubi, is part of the process of afterlife.

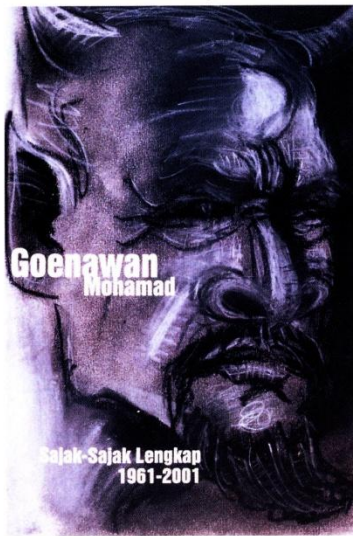
Perhaps the bitterness of debates surrounded the purpose of art as espoused by the Communists in 1965 and their subsequent suppression under Suharto's regime. The cultural arm of the Communist Party was known as Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA), and their requirement that art should serve the people was feared as propaganda.

Goenawan Mohammad, poet, critic, and former editor of the *Tempo* magazine, still maintains the criticism that he expressed against such art in the *Cultural Manifesto of 1963*, although he considers that LEKRA's policies were not yet rigidly set then. The danger, he believed, was that political commitment would lead to excessive didacticism that would stifle creativity. He made, though, an interesting distinction between state-authorized art and politically activist art. His condemnation was reserved for the ideologically rigid work produced by Communist regimes, and he gave as an example a statue called *Of An Armed Farmer*, that was a gift from the Soviet Union and stands outside the Aryaduta Hotel in Jakarta. He feared that with the artistic policies of LEKRA, such stereotypical art would become orthodox at the expense of experimentation and free expression.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, though he supports the work of activist artists such as Djoko Pekik, having written the introduction in the catalogue for Djoko's exhibition in 1999,<sup>6</sup> and the *Taring Padi* group.

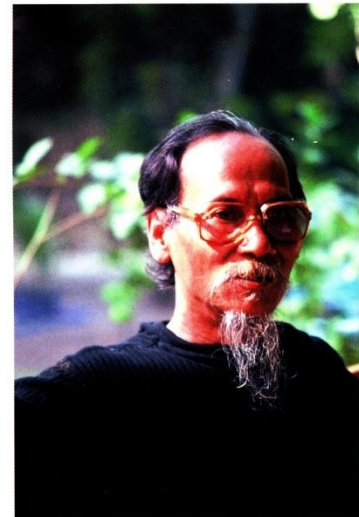
Djoko Pekik is one of the last surviving members of LEKRA. In 1965, he was imprisoned for seven years, tortured and starved, and on release, stigmatized as a

former political prisoner, which prevented him from obtaining work. He worked as a tailor for 15 years, not very profitably, and continued painting expressive works depicting the life of the poor, until in the early 1990s his work received some international and local recognition.

In 1996, Pekik began a series of paintings about a *celeng*, or boar, as a symbol of abusive absolute power. The boar is a creature that lives violently, destroying the farmer's land, and dies violently, killed by the peasants, which was a remarkably overt symbol for Suharto and his regime. The last work of the series is *Without Flowers or Condolence Telegram in the year 2000*, and was painted in 1999. It is a prediction that the boar will die in the wilderness, pecked by crows. Nearby in this image is a forest that has been cleared and destroyed, and in the distance can be seen the high-rise buildings and a fly-over of Jakarta, all signs of Suharto's program of development for Indonesia.



The cover of a book of poetry by Goenawan Mohamad with a sketch portrait by Ayu Utami.



Djoko Pekik.



Pekik's art is the extension and expression of his feelings concerning the social and political events surrounding him. His style is simple, with sweeping gestures of the brush and asymmetric compositions that often include a curve that swings across the canvas, and the significant shape or figure is placed in the foreground. There is no great intellectual subtlety or political analysis in this imagery but it does communicate easily to the viewer. For Pekik, art is only successful when it communicates to the *Rakyat*, the people.

Pekik has had the *Celeng* series photographically reproduced. The original can be seen in his studio, which is now the studio of a prosperous and successful artist, and he gave the posters to friends and interested parties. Meanwhile, as *Reformasi* gained momentum, it became fashionable and then profitable to have political images. As the rupiah collapsed, investors sought a haven in art. The art market became extraordinarily heated and the *Celeng* series became valuable.<sup>7</sup> *Berburu Celeng (Hunting the Boar, 1998)*, reproduced here as a poster for his exhibition, sold for one billion rupiah (AUS200,000) to a private collector in Yogyakarta.

Art becomes politicized not only by its style and subject matter but how it is perceived. Pekik's fantastic success is seen with envy and his political integrity has been called into question by his newfound wealth. Pekik himself doesn't see the anomaly of expressing sympathy for the poor in his work while being rich himself. What strange extremes of personal fate the rise and fall of Suharto's regime has caused.

In May 1997, Cemeti Art House, a small artist-run gallery in Yogyakarta,

mounted a group exhibition called *Slot in the Box*, in which young art-ists vented their anger and frustration about the hypocrisy of an election that would automatically return Suharto, as all previous elections had done. Officially gatherings of more than five people were banned for a period of time around the election, which would include an art exhibition, so it attracted the attention of the police. In particular they were interested in a painting by Agung Kuniawan that depicted a group of clowns with Suharto family faces and was titled, *The Holy Family*.

This was a typical satirical work by Kuniawan who had exhibited a number of works in the 1990s representing the stupidity and violence of the regime. But the gallery staff made up a different interpretation of the image and convinced the police, getting away with it. They believed because the visual arts are generally less well-understood than written material.<sup>8</sup>

**F**X. Harsono, who was another participant in this exhibition, gave a performance in the field behind the Sultan's palace followed by an installation with video recording in the gallery afterwards that was entitled *Victim/Destruction 1, 1997*. F. X. stands for Francis Xavier (although he is aware of the pun,) and he is both Christian and ethnically Chinese, which has placed him at the sharp end of political friction from the beginning of his career. Harsono had his face painted as the evil king from the Ramayana epic and wore a suit as the modern symbol of power. He burned Javanese masks placed on chairs with a flame-thrower, the mask being a symbol he has frequently used to represent the voiceless, powerless people, and

a chair being another Javanese symbol of authority. The chairs were then dismembered with a power saw, and the end result exhibited in the gallery as an installation with video.

Such performances stem from two traditions. The first tradition is that of contemporary art performance that accepts the actions of the artists as part of the artwork, the work necessarily being ephemeral and the resulting installation an extension of, but not replacement for, the performance. The second tradition is the blend of art, dance, and ceremony seen in centuries of Indonesian public occasions. The symbolism of the chair, masks, and so on was familiar to the audience, and the noise and brutality of the chainsaw was an assault upon their senses, involving them physically and preventing them from being passive witnesses.

In comparison to Djoko Pekik, F. X. Harsono rejects the role of art being the individual expression of the artist's feelings. Harsono was a leading member of the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*, or New Art Movement that, as well as seeking to represent modern Indonesia, also sought to redefine the role of the artist as a social role, arguing that art should raise consciousness and should, as he said: "...have meaning that connects people."<sup>9</sup> Again communication is more important than the formal properties of the work and decorative art is rejected.

In May 1998, riots broke out that focused on the Chinese community. This may well have been a cynical manipulation of Indonesian prejudices by the security forces as the Chinese are perceived as outsiders and not part of the diverse ethnic makeup of the archipelago. Although the Chinese are also considered to have privileges in relation to big business wealth, it was the small businesses and communities that were attacked, and Chinese women were particularly targeted in a horrific way. As the news got out of these events, the art community was deeply shocked and many artists responded directly, among them the Dutch-born Mella Jaarsma, co-founder of Cemeti Art House with her husband, Nindityo Adipurnomo. As Jaarsma said at this time of extreme tension it seemed very strange to stay in the studio and make beautiful paintings: Some artists found they couldn't work at all.

She contacted some ten expatriate friends and organized a group performance at the bottom of Malioboro Street, the main thoroughfare of Yogyakarta, to cook and serve frog's legs to the people in the street. Frog's legs are Chinese cuisine but are considered non-*Halal*, unclean or not permitted food for a Muslim. The frog's legs were offered on a paper wrap-



Agung Kuniawan, *The Holy Family*, 1997, charcoal, conte, and pastel on paper.





F. X. Harsono, *Victim /Destruction 1*, 1997.

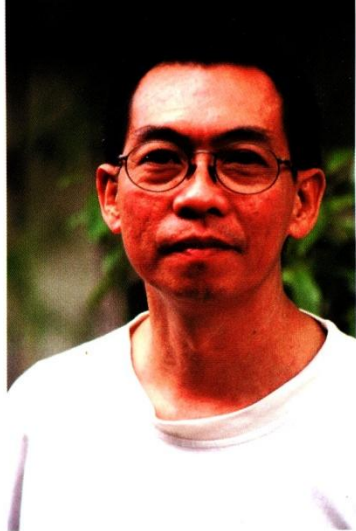
per with the word *Pribumi* written on it, a term meaning: "of the soil or native," a term from Dutch colonial times. During the riots the understanding of the term was revised and people identified their property with this word written on a sign to indicate that they were "native Indonesians," not Chinese. Jaarsma sought to provoke debate by pointing out Indonesians, who once were repressed, were now repressing others, and she did it over the most basic form of communication: food. It was dangerous and the night before the performance a number of her friends wanted to pull out. The performance was only six weeks after the worst riots and, according to Jaarsma, the *pribumi* signs could still be seen and mosques were being burned. Some people were angry with Jaarsma and her friends and one man wearing the Javanese *Peci* or cap lectured them on the meaning of *Halal*; but there were a lot of people who were intrigued and asked questions. Jaarsma acknowledges, though, that they were protected by their foreign and white status;<sup>10</sup> and the interpretation of the performance could still backfire if it were seen as foreigners instructing Indonesians about their culture.

Women constitute only a very small number of Indonesian visual artists, only 5%, according to some,<sup>11</sup> but of those there have been a few active political art-

ists. Most well-known is the performance artist Arahmaiani, but a younger generation graduating now or in the late 1990s have used their art to express concern for contemporary events. Tita Rubi graduated with a major in ceramics from the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), or the major art and design school in Bandung, in 1997,

after marriage and family had interrupted her studies.

As Lucy Lippard has also said, activist artists often combine social action, social theory, and fine arts.<sup>12</sup> Rubi had been involved in anti-Suharto activism from 1993 onwards, when she assisted banned journalists by distributing magazines, but had to stop when she became pregnant. In 1998, a student activist friend of hers told her that he had been watched during the day, so she invited him to stay with her and her family. The next day he and 11 others "disappeared." Reports from prisoners in jail confirmed these young activists had been taken by the military, they were heard during the night and conversations were held with them, but they were never seen again. Deeply disturbed, Rubi wanted to express her sadness with an installation which she titled, *Missing and Silence*, in Lontar Gallery, Jakarta. Hanging above the space were 12 plastic bags, one for each of the "Disappeared," each containing a foetus made from wax and filled with water. The idea was prompted by the *tukan ikan*, the fish sellers in Bandung who walk the streets with their fish in plastic bags, but human life had been held more cheaply than that of fish. Rubi said that the foetus held great mean-



F.X. Harsono.



ing for her as a mother, it was the seed of the future; but within a week the wax had rotted in the plastic bags. Her intention was to shock and she was successful with some viewers; too many people just accepted the 12 missing as a statistic, she said.

As *Reformasi* gained momentum and suppression of dissent was increasingly ineffectual, people and groups took the opportunity to explore previously forbidden topics. In 1997, a group of young artists, students, dropouts, and street kids squatted in the abandoned buildings of the art school *Institut Seni Indonesia* in Gampingan, a district of Yogyakarta. The Sultan of Yogyakarta owns the land and tolerates their presence, as it has provided some protection for the property. They called themselves *Taring Padi*, or "the sharp teeth of the rice farmers," and they see themselves as representing the poor and the peasant farmers through their art.

**T**oni Volunteero, a past president of the group, declared their aims as being anti-militarism, anti-feudalism, which he defined as a slavish devotion to leaders, and anti-capitalism. Their politics are all comprehensive and idealistic and involve an *ad hoc* mixture of Anarchism, Marxism, local Indonesian Socialism, and "Sukarno-ism" for they believe that, by being comprehensive, all political ideologies can be tolerated.<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, politically naïve in a city where gangs are used to destabilise the populace for political purposes; and they have been labeled *Kommis*, or Communist, a term that can still provoke a strong reaction in the average Indonesian. In February 2001, motorcycle-riding Islamic youth



Tita Rubi.

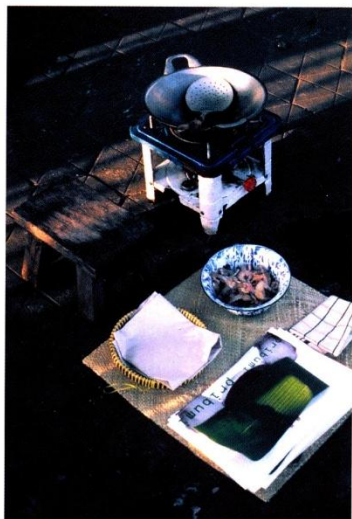
associated with the *P3* Party attacked the group, destroyed their quarters, and seriously injured some members.<sup>14</sup> This was the first time an attack on artists or art exhibitions by Islamic extremists had been reported, but there have been more since.

Yet *Taring Padi* has wide-ranging support, from the leftist think tank, *Kommunitas Utan Kayu* in Jakarta to backpacking university students. They support themselves by printing T-shirts, making posters, portable billboards, and banners that can be used as backdrops for music festivals, and *Wayang*-like figures for street demonstrations. They have received commissions from human rights organizations, NGOs, and the Jakarta Arts Festival,

*Jakarta*, amongst others. They work collectively: As one commentator said, they "negotiate their artistic egos," rather than demand individual creative space.<sup>15</sup>

This process has a basis both in Indonesian traditional arts and in Socialist theory, but the balancing act between political activism and individual creativity has led to a certain uniformity in their imagery. The *Petani*, or peasants, are invariably depicted in conical hats, solidarity by fists in the air and villains as dogs and pigs. The debate as to the value of their art illustrates the conflicting evaluation of political art generally. Their supporters maintain that their work needs to get the message through at the most basic level and needs to be clear, straightforward, and realistic for the man on the street. It is a bold and an easily recognizable tool for worthy campaigns. Their detractors point to the stereotypical imagery: as Mella Jaarsma said, it's just "...people wearing the farmers hat, putting their hands in the sky like fighting for freedom... Socialist and Communist images appear again instead of looking for new images."<sup>16</sup> Further serious criticism points to the manner in which they constitute a group speaking on behalf of another less powerful group, perpetuating the traditional Javanese hierarchical society rather than changing it. These images objectify the poor, for example, presenting the underprivileged peasant as a thin and downtrodden stereotype to the educated urban elite.<sup>17</sup>

Where is political art now? Last year as Megawati swept to power, Bandung was full of the red flags and bull symbol of her PDI-P Party. In May 2002 I had to hunt to find one. The euphoria of *Reformasi* has evaporated and, along with many, artists



Mella Jaarsma, *Pribumi*, 1998, performance cooking frogs legs at the bottom of Maliboro St., Yogyakarta.



Mella Jaarsma.



are disillusioned. Harsono said: "...I asked myself, should I work with social and political issues? I am in a transitional period, I must think about the social and the cultural, I must think about art itself."<sup>18</sup> Δ

Notes:

1. W.S. Rendra. *Development as Portrayed in Poetry*. Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Pembangunan, 1980, pp.27-28, quoted in Virginia Matheson Hooker, "Expression: Creativity Despite Constraint", Donald K. Emmerson, Ed., *Indonesia Beyond Subarto, Polity Economy Society Transition*. C. Asia Society 1999, p 264.
2. Interview, Jim Supangkat, June 2000. See also the interview with Mella Jaarsma in reference to a work by Agung Kurniawan in the exhibition, "Slot In the Box" mentioned later.
3. Heri Dono, Public Forum, National Gallery of Australia, October 8, 2002.
4. Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power", in Bian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p344.
5. Interview with Goenawan Mohamad, May 17, 2002.
6. Goenawan Mohamad, "On fine arts, the people and the boar", Introduction to the catalogue *Hunting the Boar*: an exhibition by Djoko Pekik at Galeri Lontar, November 5-22, 1999 at Galeri Nasional, Jakarta.
7. Amir Sidharta, "Boom or Bust Indonesian Art in the Midst of Economic Crisis", *Lati-*



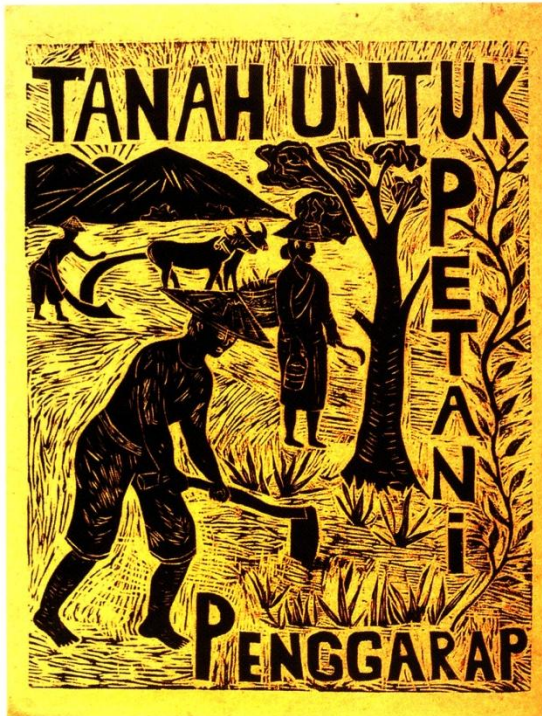
Taring Padi at Gampingan, preparing banners, 2000.

8. *tudes*, Vol. 2. March 2001, p53.
9. Interview with Mella Jaarsma, co-director Cemeti Rumah Seni, June 26, 2000.
10. Interview, F. X. Harsono, Jakarta, June 26, 2001.
11. Interview with Mella Jaarsma, June 28, 2000.
12. M. Dwi Marianto, "Recognising new pillars in the Indonesian Art World", *Text and Subtext*, Exhibition Catalogue, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore 2000, p139. When asked how he had obtained these figures, Dwi said that he had done a head count of his female students.
13. Lucy Lippard, *ibid*, p342
14. Toni Volunteero and Heidi Arbuckle, an Australian research student, speaking at the

*Taring Padi* seminar, UTS, Sydney, October 17, 2001.

15. Email relayed from Heidi Arbuckle February 22, 2001.
16. Heidi Arbuckle, *ibid*, *Taring Padi* seminar.
17. Interview, Mella Jaarsma, Yogyakarta, June 28, 2000.
18. Tom Plummer, quoting Moelyono in, "Art for a better world", *Inside Indonesia* No 53, January-March 1998, p26.

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Taring Padi, *Land for Peasants*, woodblock print.



Taring Padi, banner for rock concert, 2000.