

# COMMUNAL PERCEPTION IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION OF *ARTEFAK LAUT KIDUL* PAINTING EXHIBITION

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## ABSTRACT

The visual similarities of imaginary objects in a joint painting exhibition are an intriguing subject to discuss. It is as if visual art creators had a conversation with one another in an imaginary space, even when the creators had different backgrounds, places, and working times. The facts apparent in an exhibition titled "Artefak Laut Kidul" (artifacts from the southseas) indicated the existence of visual signs that lead to the similarities of the elements of objects. It is interesting to question: what evoked the similarities of visual perception in response to the theme of the exhibition? The theme can actually be widely interpreted, as artists who have the freedom to interpret generally do. Through ethno-semiotic method, the researcher attempted to understand the allure of the phenomenon and what influenced the artists in their creation process.

Keywords: Perception, Visual Communication, Laut Kidul

## ABSTRAK

Kesamaan visual objek imajiner dalam sebuah pameran lukisan bersama, merupakan sesuatu peristiwa yang menarik, seolah olah antara satu kreator seni visual dengan kreator lainnya telah saling berdialog dalam ruang imajiner. Padahal para kreator memiliki latar belakang, tempat dan waktu bekerja yang berbeda. Fakta-fakta di ruang pameran bertajuk "Artefak Laut Kidul" menunjukkan adanya tanda-tanda visual yang mengarah pada kesamaan elemen-elemen objek. Pertanyaan yang menarik, apa yang membangun kesamaan persepsi visual para seniman dalam menanggapi tema pameran. Padahal tema tersebut sesungguhnya bisa diartikan secara luas, sebagaimana umumnya seniman yang memiliki kebebasan menginterpretasi. Melalui metode etno-semiotik peneliti mencoba memahami daya tarik fenomena tersebut, apa saja yang mempengaruhi latar belakang para seniman dalam proses kreasinya.

Kata kunci: Persepsi, Komunikasi Visual, Laut Kidul

## BACKGROUND

This research is a way to explore the traces of the artworks featured on an exhibition titled *Artefak Laut Kidul (Artefacts from the South Seas)* held at Galeri Papuri, Bandung, on December 2016. 110 artists participated in this event. There was a great interest in the event, not only because its theme highlighted local cultural discourse in nautical context, but also because it put the myth of Java Island's *laut kidul* (southern sea region) into visual medium. The artworks shown were diverse in expressions, media, technique, and styles unique to each participating artist, but they all shared the same spirit of thematic visual exploration. The artists' visual interpretation emerged from the same desire to question the phenomena and noumena in the South Seas through the artists' intra-personal communication.

This paper presents the researcher's response to the artworks displayed in Galeri Papuri exhibition through the perspective of Visual Communication. The paper examined the connotation of the paintings both in general and in specific. The examination was conducted on visual signs contained inside all of the exhibited paintings. As one of the exhibition participants himself, the researcher wished to note that this paper is not merely written based on appreciation, assessment, or aesthetic critiques on the artworks visual form, but also a manifestation of the author's aesthetic experience during his creative process based on the theme of the exhibition.

The title of the exhibition, "*Artefak Laut Kidul*", can be examined first through each word. *Artefak* (artifact) generally refers to archeological or historical items that are made or modified by humans and are transferrable.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the word artifacts refers to objects. However in the context of Galeri Papuri exhibition, there were no artworks that were derived from the meaning of artifacts in its true sense, such as the visual display of *keris*, *kujang*, ancient *kemamik*, or a king's throne depicted as a subject matter of a painting. Instead, the keyword "*laut kidul*" became the most popular cue among the artists, as can be seen from their artistic expressions based on the determined theme. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of the exhibition were still vibrant as a result of the diverse visual objects displayed, which included but not limited to daily tools often used in nautical and coastal life such as fish, boats, or offerings presented to the sea gods. There were also symbolic expressions in the form of expressive brushstrokes that did not resemble any tangible object (abstraction). Other objects depicted in the artworks including common folks and their coastal life, but there were also mythological beings such as dragons and white tigers, as well as the figure of a woman that is commonly associated with Nyi Roro Kidul, an imaginative character who was believed to be the ruler of the entire Laut Kidul.

The multi-various visual interpretations and styles in the gallery showed apparent similar visual characteristics, namely in the choice of colors and the choice of figures/non-figures. The author then considered these similarities as a communal perception<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>2</sup> *The online version of Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) or the Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language Kamus defines the word "komunal" (communal) as: noun komunal/ko•mu•nal/ a 1 related to komune (commune); 2 belongs to the people or*

*general public; and the word persepsi (perception) as /per•sep•si/ /persépsi/ noun 1 a direct response (reception) from something; absorption: needs to be investigated; 2 process of acquiring knowledge through senses.*

Referring to the dictionary definition above, “communal perception” may be defined as a general/public response or opinion on something. In the case of this paper, the common perception was shared by the artists participating in the Laut Kidul exhibition as a response to the event’s theme.



Poster for *Artefak Laut Kidul* exhibition  
(Source: Committee- email 2016)

Did the communal perception in choosing the objects of the paintings indicate similarities of cultural background? If so, did that cultural background become the main factor for the communal perception, considering there were striking visual similarities in certain artistic expressions? Then, what about the communal belief in the myth of Laut Kidul—did it become an inseparable part of the creation process, which made the exhibited artworks seem to have resemblance in feature? The answers to these questions are interesting to unearth, considering artists tend to prefer working individually, each with their preferable space and time to enable them to be fully immersed in their visual interpretation based on their respective egos. With such unique creative process, the

results tend to manifest differently even when responding to the same discourse.

### THE VISUAL COMMUNICATION OF ARTEFAK LAUT KIDUL

In general, communication can be defined as an activity of interaction within a particular context of space and time (Supriatna, 2014:135). Raymond S. Ross (in Dedy Mulyana 2008: 69) defined communication as a process of sorting, selecting, and sending symbols in such a way in order to assist its receiver to incite meaning or response from their thought that is similar to what the communicator meant. Meanwhile, West and Tunner (2008:5) stated that communication is a social process where individuals use symbols to create and interpret meanings in their circumstances. The two definitions above relates to Kenney’s (2009:1) definition of visual communication “as a social process in which people exchange messages that include visuals.” Kenney (2009:1) referred to visual media that include pictures, paintings, photographs, videos, films, computer graphics, animations, and virtual reality. In the case of this research, the artists positioned their works as a communication medium (message) for the mass (appreciators/appreciant).

Interpretation of a discourse depends highly on the subjective knowledge and experience of the interpreter; that is why individuals may interpret the same thing differently. Such is the same for artists participating in the exhibition, as they were free to interpret the theme of the event to their hearts' desire. Even so, the artists did not merely interpret the theme in its literal sense, but rather used their creativity to improvise and set their imaginations as free as possible in interpreting every word in the theme. They could even decipher the title using their mental experience that may depart greatly from the title. The word "artifact" could be interpreted not merely textually, but also contextually. The word can be seen as a derivation from "art" or "arte" added with "fact". In a simple sense, the word "artifact" could be defined as "facts of art". In a broader sense, the word may relate to the culture of the people in southern coast and can pertain to material and immaterial objects. The matter of interpretation does not stop there; there are still plenty of other possibilities of interpretation that can be implemented in visual form (Supriatna 2016:2)

This painting exhibition was a means for artists to communicate in a visual context. Via their paintings, the artists conveyed their message to the public regarding *Artefak Laut Kidul*; the works were the reflection of their mind journey and self-manifesto as a response for the phenomena and noumena related to the exhibition title.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative-descriptive method, supported by quantitative facts found in the field. The primary assumption is that there were signs of communal perception of culture apparent on the site of *Artefak Laut Kidul* exhibition. In order to be more comprehensive, the research needed a theoretical approach that was able to decipher the similarities of the signs mentioned above. That approach was ethno-semiotic. This approach enabled the author to connect one sign detected in an artwork creation to another. The meaning of the signs was then connected with the cultural context influencing the artwork.

In this observation of communal perception, the exhibited paintings may depict concrete objects or figure, but they might also depict metaphysical subjects that were treated as truly existing (mental interpretant) based on beliefs on certain myths. Relevant to that notion, semiotic expert Pierce argued for a looser requirement, saying that objects do not have to be concrete, observable, visible, or existing as an empirical reality, imaginary. The relations of signs will form a triadic structure of interpretant, object, and representamen (Budiman, 2011: 74).

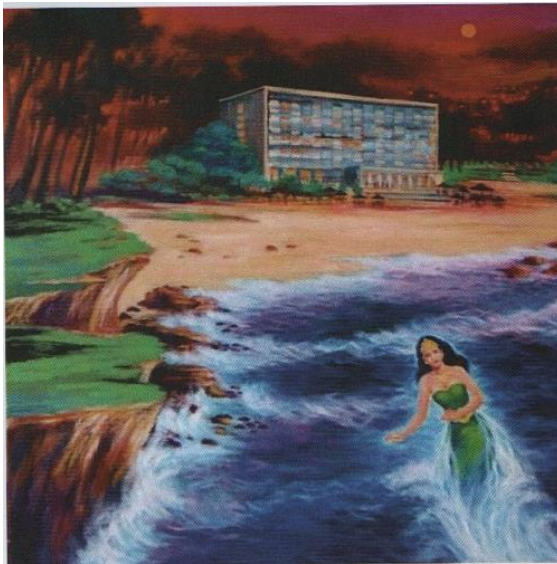
## DISCUSSION

Edi Hermanto (2016:7), the curator of this exhibition, explained the event's objective. He noted that the event was meant to lead us to the compelling influence of Laut Kidul legend, particularly centered on the locus of Sukabumi, West Java. Inevitably, the legend of Nyi Roro Kidul would take over the theme. Nyi Roro Kidul legend could be a dominant work stimulus for the artists, and it really showed in the exhibition: it was as if her mythic aura was present along with the paintings, accompanied by surrealistic visual creation, tales that were beyond logic, and transcendental aesthetic experience.

As a whole, the features in the works can be divided into natural oceanic phenomena, socio-cultural activity of people, and icons that represent the myth of *nu ngageugeuh* (the one who rules) Laut Kidul. In order to comprehend the communal perception in the paintings, not only did the author interpret the works one by one, but the author also observed the works according to its categorization based on visual similarities.

## VISUAL ANALYSIS

### 1. Form



*Pantai Kidul Menjelang Malam* by Soetrisno  
Source: *Artefak*  
*Laut Kidul* Exhibition Catalogue 2016

Form consisted of the choice of styles and object. The majority of the paintings—that is, or 98%, or 105 out of 110—chose realism as their style. They depicted representative objects with clear features, such as beaches, seas, or icons. This realism style position the artists as a straightforward messenger of visual ideas, facilitating receivers of the message to fully recognize the objects featured and therefore made it easier for them to understand the message conveyed by the painting.

Icon that was prominently featured in 66% of the paintings (60 of them, in precise) is the figure of a young, beautiful woman, who was easily identifiable as the

representation of Nyi Roro Kidul, the ruler of the South Seas. Signs that signified the character of Nyi Roro Kidul included green-colored clothing that covered half of the lower bosom and a crown on top of her head as a symbol of a queen. These were either the signs of *sinsign*, or the actual existence of the folktales and myth that were ingrained in the people's belief system, or an influence of previous artworks that had acquired legitimacy (*legisign*). These previous artworks are Basuki Abdullah's "Nyi Roro Kidul" and Basuki Bawono's "Medal Sekar Samudra".



The painting of Nyi Roro Kidul by Basuki Abdullah<sup>3</sup>



*Medal Sekar Samudra (Nyi Roro Kidul)*,  
by Basuki Bawono  
Source: *Artefak*  
*Laut Kidul* Exhibition Catalogue 2016

## 2. Index-Icon

The relationship between index and the realism style of Nyi Roro Kidul icon signified the boldness of form, stating that she was a noble young woman with queen as her title, with incomparable beauty and power over the seas. This indexial relationship can be seen from the signs worn by the character, such as the attire and



*Galura Laut Kidul* : by Teddy Wirahadikusumah  
Source: *Artefak Laut Kidul*  
Exhibition Catalogue 2016

its attribute, which all signified the same thing. The figure of the woman as a ruler of the ocean can be implied from her position and the sea, as she was always painted as being on the middle of the ocean surface or on a beach. As Alex Sobur noted, “an icon is a physical object (in two or three dimension) that resembles what it represents,” while index is “a sign that exist in association with a constant signified” (2003:41). Thus, the color green that was prominently present as an icon on Nyi Roro Kidul’s dress as well as on the color of the ocean suggested a shared

perception and the presence of *legisign*, which is a sign that had been agreed upon mutually that it had become a standard of signifier for Nyi Roro Kidul figure. This communal perception might be provoked by folktales that had been ingrained so deeply into the local belief system that it was considered as reality. The works of the late maestros Basuki Abdullah and Basuki Buwono might also be the factor that greatly inspired this communal perception as the author have mentioned before.

Either in the form of painting, photographs, or images in mass media, this communal perception had become a symbol of locality, especially that of the South Seas (Laut Kidul).



*Sang Ratu*, by: Bambang Kuswindarto  
Source: *Artefak Laut Kidul*  
Exhibition Catalogue 2016

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## CONCLUSION

Visual Communication relies heavily on senses, especially the sense of sight. What is seen becomes a perception interpreted by the mind and produces sensation. Therefore, the visual interpretation between a messenger (creator) with a recipient (appreciator) will influence each other in visual context. This influence is what the works of the late painters Basuki Abdullah and Basuki Buwono had done to their succeeding painters who carry the same message.

As a symbol of the Southern Sea beach people, Nyi Roro Kidul is so strongly immortalized through the legendary myth that her existence is even largely considered as a natural fact. This strong belief has, in a way, “imprisoned” the minds of local people as well as the artists involved in *Artefak Laut Kidul* exhibition; the latter who had made the idea of Nyi Roro Kidul’s existence as the main subject matter in the event.

Therefore, the similarities of objects featured in *Artefak Laut Kidul* exhibition is an example of communal perception. Not only it reflects a collective understanding and belief, but also shared realization to reinforce local and national values through the means of visual artworks (paintings).

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