



A Study of Sunaryo's Wot Batu through Art Criticism

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Abstract. The Indonesian modern art scene in the 1940s, which related to many ideologies, also influenced the art of Indonesian artist Sunaryo (1943). One of his recent works, *Wot Batu*, is a work of land art consisting of sequential installations made with stones lying in a landscape in Bandung. Wot Batu means 'stone bridge' in old Javanese. This study aimed to discover Sunaryo's artistic qualities in *Wot Batu* in order to trace Sunaryo's perspective of spirituality and his background as a modern Indonesian artist. This research used Feldmann's art criticism approach. The interpretation and judgment process in this work was obtained by connecting a formal analysis of the artwork to Sunaryo's background as an artist. The research findings confirm that Sunaryo presents his own perspective on spirituality in this work through the use of stones as the main material and other natural elements. He made use of various aspects, such as combining and assembling stones, multisensory stimulation of the visitor, the site and the movement of the visitor inside it, support his concept. This study revealed that Sunaryo's perspective on spirituality not merely concerns the relationship between humans and a greater power, but also humans as a part of nature, balance, the perpetuity of the universe, and the experience of nothingness and serenity.

Keywords: *formalism; Sunaryo; spirituality; modern art; sculpture.*

1 Introduction

Sunaryo was born in Banyumas on the 15th of May 1943. He showed his excellence in art at school age by winning drawing competitions. He continued his study at the Faculty of Art and Design in ITB, majoring in sculpture. During his study, his skills became more prominent, which led him to continue his study abroad in Carrara, Italy [1]. In 1978, he joined some of his colleagues in an agency focused on art and design, called DECENTA. He got involved in more architectural projects and commissions concerning monuments and artistic elements of buildings, which allowed him to broaden his understanding of spatial elements [2]. He opened his art gallery Selasar Sunaryo in Bandung in the middle of Indonesia's political and monetary crisis in 1998. Sunaryo is an artist with 'golden hands', who can create masterpieces regardless of the materials or style applied. He has worked in various art forms, such as sculpture, painting, screen

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printing, assemblage, and architectural installations. In 2015, Sunaryo finished *Wot Batu*, an installation made of stones in Dago Pakar Timur, situated in the hills of the northern part of Bandung. The stone installations were assembled in a sequence surrounded by other natural elements to deliver Sunaryo's thoughts on spiritualism [3].

Wot Batu is one of Sunaryo's pivotal works. It demonstrates his personal ideas on humans, human life, and humans' relationship with nature and the universe. *Wot Batu* was inspired by Sunaryo's eagerness to create land art, which makes this work rich in delivering his ideas. Its importance in Sunaryo's art journey was the primary motivation of this research to study *Wot Batu*. The main questions of this study were: 'How are Sunaryo's ideas on spirituality delivered in *Wot Batu*?' and 'How did Sunaryo assemble the stones and other natural elements and the site's locality to support his ideas?' The scope of the work's formal elements discussed in this study is limited to: (1) the composition of the separate installations, (2) the outline of each installation's form, (3) the relationship with other natural elements surrounding the work, (4) the technology Sunaryo used to support his ideas, and (5) the overall layout of *Wot Batu*. This paper will not explain the smaller details of the installations such as the proportions of the repetitive lines on the stones.

2 Methodology

This research looked at Sunaryo's perspective on spirituality by describing and examining *Wot Batu*'s formal elements and how they are connected to Sunaryo's background. A comparison to previous works is needed to obtain an interpretation and judgment of *Wot Batu*. The method used was art criticism based on Feldmann's method. The art history method was used to trace back Sunaryo's background in the art world. The author did direct observation of *Wot Batu* as well as a literature review about the Indonesian modern art scene. The author also conducted an interview with Sunaryo. The observation took place for a period of two weeks.

3 Results

3.1 Sunaryo as an Artist in Indonesia

Sunaryo's style in art can be traced back through time by looking at the historiography of Indonesian modern art written by Yustiono. Indonesia is a post-colonial country that had both right-wing and left-wing influences during the cold war. Liberals and communists both thrived and affected every aspect of the country, including art education. However, nationalism and religion-tied ideology were also evolving. All parties were competing to win people's votes,

and art was one of the tools employed. This condition shaped Indonesian modern art and art education in Indonesia [4].

The competition between parties brought forth two art schools in the 1940s with different ideologies supporting them. The Fine Art Department of ITB referred to the tenet of detaching art from its usefulness ('art for art's sake') with significant formalism and cubism accentuating ratio and logic in creating art. ITB was originally founded by the Dutch and had Dutch people as teachers, such as Ries Mulder at the Fine Art Department. On the other hand, Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI) in Yogyakarta, subscribed to a very different definition of art. The majority of ASRI's artists joined LEKRA, the division under the Indonesian Communist Party, who used art as a tool to express their aspirations against social inequality. ITB was accused of being a laboratory for the Dutch; thus, the 'Bandung sect' theory was born.

After Sunaryo finished his study in Carrara, he became a teacher in ITB and met again with his friends, Sunaryo, A.D. Pirous, Sutanto, G. Sidharta, and other artists. They later formed an agency called DECENTA (Design Center Agency), in 1978. They explored traditional Indonesian patterns by doing many projects concerning artistic elements in architectural and interior works. Sunaryo focused on exploring patterns from Papua and Nias, consisting of repetitive lines and dots [2]. Repetitive lines in Papuan patterns are considered to be unfinished, and he claims to feel the vibrations in these kinds of lines [5]. These lines can be seen in his more recent abstract paintings and sculptures.

Sunaryo's skills in art and architecture have evolved as can be seen from his works after DECENTA, such as *Monumen Perjuangan Rakyat Jawa Barat* and *Monumen Sudirman* from the late 1990s. In the early 1990s, his work showed his interest in spiritual topics, as he delivered his thoughts in paintings such as *Thawaf* (1990) or assemblages such as *Kayu, Batu dan Air* (1992). Conceptually, these works have a resemblance to A.D. Pirous' or Sadali's works, which show a strong formalist style and a spiritual message and allow the viewer to meditate about human life and its creator. These works can be categorized as abstract-meditative [6]. It can be seen that the presence of both A.D. Pirous and Sadali in Sunaryo's journey has had an impact on the development of his art.

Sunaryo never limited his ideas to only one issue or style. The Sudirman monument in Jakarta shows his skills in producing realist art. He held an exhibition entitled *Titik Nadir* in 1998, which brought up social issues related to the Indonesian political crisis. He is one of the Indonesian artists who have concerns about spiritualism in art. His installations often bring up the realities of the life of humans and their relationship with God and their fellow creatures. One of them is *Semedi Ning Jenar* (2005), which was installed at Candi Plaosan.

3.2 Description on *Wot Batu*

The title *Wot Batu* is taken from old Javanese, meaning 'bridge of stone'. The stones are 136 in number and were assembled on a 2000 m-squared site, which includes a grass area, a block area, and a pond. *Wot Batu* covers a square-shaped area with a concrete wall as its border. The separation between the entrance and the exit indicates that visitors need to walk along a specific path to explore *Wot Batu* (Figure 1).

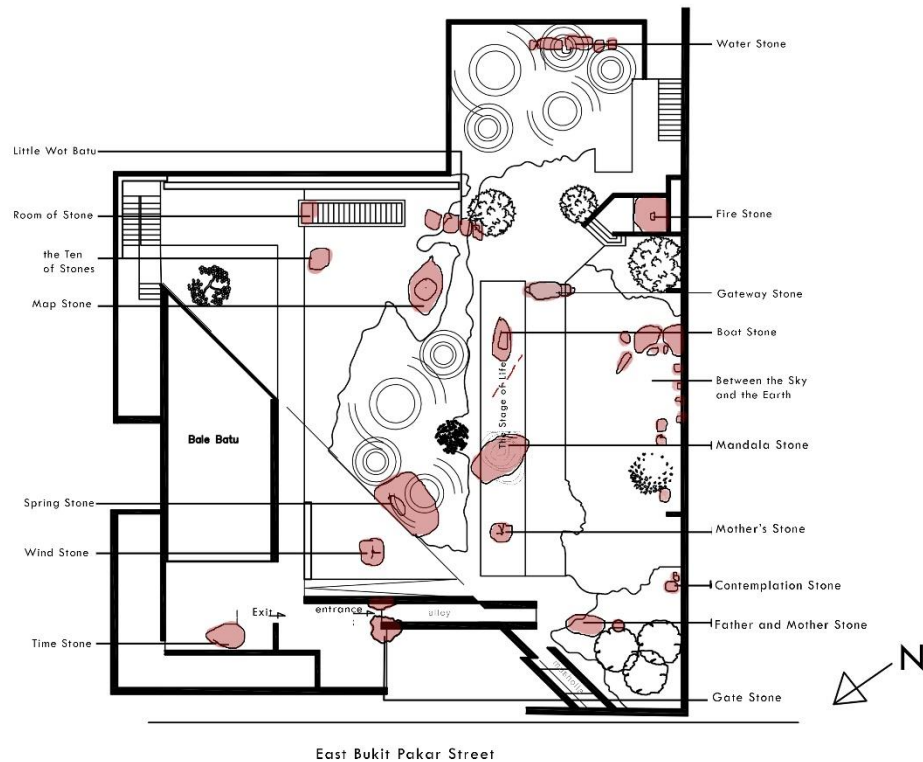


Figure 1 Layout of *Wot Batu* (designed by the author).

The diagonal lines of the square point towards the south-north and east-west. The east-west axis is prominent, indicated by ground leveling, a slit in the wall of the entrance, and the wall of *Bale Batu*. This line points in the direction which Muslims face in prayer, towards the holy city of Mecca, where the holy stone Kaaba is situated. The line stretches towards *Wot Batu*'s praying room. Different ground cover materials, such as pebbles, blocks, grass, and pressed pebbles, can be seen in the layout, giving the visitors a different experience as they walk

through the different areas of *Wot Batu*. The pond is elongated along the south-north axis, dividing *Wot Batu* into two areas, right and left.

At the entrance, an alley is lined by concrete walls with an assemblage of a 300-cm vertical stone, a slab stone above it, and another slab stone above the concrete walls, called *Gate Stone*. The vertical stone has scratched repetitive lines and smooth glossy parts. The alley is 100 cm wide and 500 cm long, with pebbles on the ground, allowing the visitors to hear a rattle when they walk over the path. The concrete walls are about 450 cm tall, so people walking through the alley cannot see behind the walls. There is a slit that allows them to peek inside the inner part of *Wot Batu* after a 300-cm walk.



Figure 2 (a) Father's stone, (b) Mother's stone.

At the end of the alley, a vertical stone stands tall. Another slab stone lies next to it. The stones together are called *Batu Abah dan Ambu* (Figure 2), meaning *Father's and Mother's Stone* in Sundanese. The vertical *Father's Stone* is a cylindrical-shaped stone, 120 cm in diameter, with a texture and a darker color. *Mother's Stone*, the stone slab next to it, is 50 cm tall and 220 cm wide with steps on its surface and a 30 cm-diameter bowl cavity in its center.

A small room located next to *Father's and Mother's Stone* is a praying room. There, Sunaryo put stones on the wall, exposed to sunlight that enters through a skylight above (Figure 3a). He put a glass with the Arabic text 'Read' on it. There is a small dark stone on the glass that was taken from a cave in Mecca. In the

other direction of *Father's and Mother's Stone*, a pair of stones called *Contemplation Stone*, lie below a Bayan tree (Figure 3b). The stone with a lower height has a surface shaped into a complement of a human's posterior. The glossy surface fits the human anatomy when sitting on it. The higher stone (90 cm) has a glossy part on its upper surface that can hold someone's arm when sitting on the *Contemplation Stone*. When visitors sit on it, the cold surface of the stone touches their

On the grass area next to *Father's and Mother's Stone*, a eucalyptus tree stands a bit slanted to the east, while three vertical stones that are also slanted, are lined up beside it (Figure 4). One stone is as tall as a human, while the others are about 50 to 60 cm in height. On the other side, huge stones with a height of 100 cm and maximum 100 cm wide lie 200 cm behind the slanted stones. A small part of the surface of these vast stones has repetitive lines engraved on it. Small stones with repetitive lines engraved on their texture are installed on the wall, creating a horizontal order. These stones are brought together in the installation *Between the Earth and the Sky*.



Figure 3 (a) Praying room, (b) *Contemplation Stone*.



Figure 4 *Between the Earth and the Sky.*

Across the grass area there is a concrete pedestal called *Stage of Life*, 20 cm high, 300 cm wide, and 600 cm long (Figure 5a). *Batu Indung*, or *Stone of Mother* in Sundanese, a stone with a darker upper surface and a copper leafless tree-shaped sculpture, is planted to the west (Figure 5b). The second installation, placed on a pedestal, is *Mandala Stone*, a slab stone 50 cm thick and 350 cm wide. A mandala is engraved on its upper surface (Figure 5c). The circles expand to the surface of *Stage of Life*.

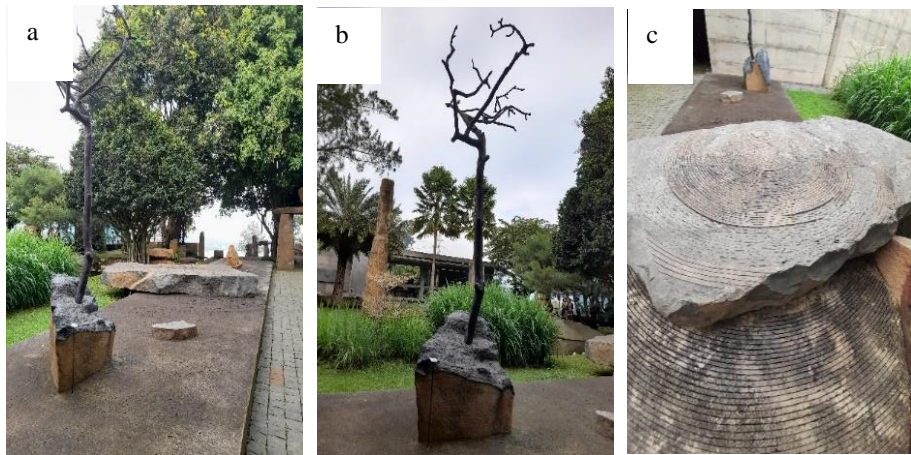


Figure 5 (a) Stage of life, (b) stone of mother, and (c) Mandala Stone.

Before the far-left installation, some red metal bars planted on the surface of *Stage of Life* are lined up, pointing north-south. Meanwhile, next to the metal bars lies a third installation, called *Boat Stone* (Figure 6). It has the shape of a sailboat with dashed and dotted lines on the sail. The installation is 50 cm tall and 200 cm long. The sharp end of the boat points toward *Water Stone*, while the blunt end points to *Stone of Mother*. Thus, it looks like the boat is sailing from *Stone of Mother* to another installation in the east.



Figure 6 Boat Stone.

A stone gate called *Getaway Stone* is standing next to the *Stage of Life* installation. Two huge bar stones of about 300 cm height are standing next to each other, and a single stone above connects them (Figure 7a). *Getaway Stone* forms a threshold from the blocked ground area to an area with pressed pebbles on the ground. Another slab stone lies on the upper part and has a pattern of repetitive lines that look like a giant version of a human fingerprint. Two medium-sized stones stand leaning on the right side of *Getaway Stone* to balance the composition, since the other part is 'heavy' next to the concrete pedestal.

After passing the gate, in a square-shaped room with concrete walls and steps at the entrance, we find *Fire Stone* (Figure 7b). The room lines with the south-north axis. *Fire Stone* consists of stone slabs placed on the ground with a 25-cm wide

hole that emits fire and is restricted by a metal plate (Figure 7c). The installation in the pond is called *Water Stone* (Figure 8b). The installation is placed on the edge of the pond. It is an installation that consists of block and slab stones that are assembled into a composition. The slab stones lie on their horizontal axis, while the tube-like stones are on their vertical axis. A panoramic view of Bandung forms *Water Stone*'s background. The pond reflects the sky and the tree above, and it is elongated along the south-north axis, forming a small river.



Figure 7 (a) Getaway Stone, (b) entrance of the Fire Stone, and (c) Fire Stone.



Figure 8 (a) Little Wot Batu and (b) Water Stone.

Little Wot Batu is a bridge that connects both parts and consists of four slab stones placed adjacent to each other as steps (Figure 8a). The *Map Stone* installation, with an irregular shape and a flat upper surface, lies near the bridge. The installation is 180 cm wide and 50 cm tall. An 80-cm diameter round plaque is planted on its upper surface, showing a symbol with the text 'Bukit Pakar' on it,

which is the name of the place where *Wot Batu* is located. Lines are drawn to connect the text 'Bukit Pakar' with mountain symbols on its periphery. The mountain symbols are different from each other, with smoke symbols above them – each mountain symbol is accompanied by a volcano's name and its height. The wind directions are written on the plaque in Sundanese.

A clear pane of glass acts as a roof for the steps below, directed towards a crypt to the east. From afar, it looks like a clear glass pane is standing on the stones. The crypt is painted black and covered by a black curtain at its entrance. Inside, a video mapping installation is projected onto a screen made of stone with a bowl cavity on its surface. The stone is about 150 cm wide, and the cavity's diameter is about 90 cm. The video shows an animation of how the universe was formed, based on the Big Bang theory. The objects have round shapes and are shown in a combination of red, yellow, black, and white colors, and the bowl cavity makes it look like it is protruding.

Across the glass room, ten slab stones with irregular shapes are stacked vertically. All slabs were laid down as horizontal planes and have different heights, from 20 cm to 40 cm, making the full-scale installation 350 cm tall. It is called *Ten Stones*. About 400 cm next to it, a stone installation lies on the pond's edge, called *Spring Stone*. The installation is situated upstream of the small river and the pond in *Wot Batu*. The installation consists of two different stones. One is a 180-cm wide irregular shaped slab stone with a mandala texture that expands to the periphery. Another stone, with a trapezoid shape, lies on the upper surface. The joint between the stones emits water that flows to the pond.

3.3 Formal Analysis

Sunaryo treated the materials according to their nature. The natural irregular shapes of the stones and their hardness are celebrated by not sculpting them into precise shapes. He explored the possibility of smoothening some parts of the stones but most of the stone surfaces are still rough. The artificial colors Sunaryo used in *Wot Batu* are red and black. Sunaryo's intention to celebrate the materials is clearly shown by leaving them in their natural color. The red-yellow and black colors also appear in his previous works from the DECENTA period and after. It became his trademark to use repetitive lines and the color red. The characteristics of quiet water in a puddle are shown in the *Water Stone* pool and the bowl of *Batu Ambu*. In *Spring Stone*, the characteristics of water flowing to a lower place are shown. These methods indicate Sunaryo as a formalist. He is truthful to the material, as he accentuates the stones' hardness and solidity [7].

Sunaryo assembled his works in *Wot Batu* by his feelings and understanding of spirituality. As he put five elements of nature based on *wuxing* in Chinese

philosophy (water, earth, fire, wind, metal) in his works [8], he plays with balance and harmony guided by his intuition. Sunaryo divides the *Wot Batu* site into a left and a right part using the opposite material of stone, water, which indicates that Sunaryo has a strong foundation in formalism. He sought harmony and balance in creating his work while delivering his perspective on spiritualism. The cultural aspect of the place influenced Sunaryo. Even though *Wot Batu* is old Javanese, the names of the stones and the engraved texts are all in Sundanese.

Sunaryo used the wind directions as the basis for creating *Wot Batu*. A diagonal axis based on the east-west axis divides *Wot Batu* in two. He drew a continuous invisible line, using the line of the building, ground level, a slit in the entrance alley wall, to the praying room that points towards the qibla, the holy Kabah stone in Mecca. The separation between the entrance and the exit makes the visitor to walk in a specific direction, along a designed path. If the visitor follows the sequence of *Wot Batu*, the direction is counterclockwise. This is similar in other sacred stone sites, such as Avebury, Borobudur, and Kabah [9]. People who visit those sites walk counterclockwise on a circular path. Walking through a Zen Garden in Japan is analogous to a spiritual journey. We also can see this in *Wot Batu*, as Sunaryo gives meaning to his installation (especially *Stage of Life*) as a metaphor for the journey of life. The journey through a Zen Garden ends in emptiness, as the visitor walks by a tea ceremony [10]. *Bale Batu*, at the end of the journey through *Wot Batu*, has a similar function as a resting place to enjoy a drink.

All the experiences in *Wot Batu* allow the visitor to be immersed in this work of art on spiritualism by feeling it with all their senses. For example by touching the texture of the stones, by sitting on *Contemplation Stone* with a Bayan tree over them, listening to the sound of the pebbles at the entrance, and feeling small between huge stones. The works on the left part of *Wot Batu* are supported by technology such as video mapping and gearing systems. The use of technology shows that Sunaryo keeps up with the contemporary art scene. The repetitive lines on *Mandala Stone*, *Spring Stone*, *Getaway Stone*, and *Between the Earth and the Sky* can also be found in some of his previous works from the DECENTA era, in which he explored Irian and Nias patterns. In *Wot Batu*, the lines form patterns that delivers his message of spiritualism.

3.4 Interpretation

Our hypothesis is that Sunaryo shows his perspective on spiritualism and his view on human life and mortality, and humans' relation with the universe through his truthfulness to the materials, the spatial arrangement, the composition of the stones, and other components (including existing vegetation, wind direction, and

the cultural aspect of the place). By exhibiting massive stones, he shows that humans are just tiny creatures in the universe.

Bukit Pakar, the highland where Wot Batu is located, suits the concept of higher places in Indonesia, as sacred places closer to God [11]. Bukit Pakar is a quieter place than Bandung city. *Wot Batu* is isolated, allowing the visitors to reflect on their everyday life. Sunaryo's intention to make his work a 'bridge' also supports his perspective on human life. Choosing stones as the primary material and his method of creating the work suit the concept. Sunaryo chose stones because of their durability and timelessness. Stones are also the material for various sacred sites created by humans since the pre-modern age. As tombstones, as initial materials in Zen Gardens [10], and also in sites from the megalithic and neolithic eras, such as in Stonehenge and Avebury. All of the sites show that stone is a timeless material that has a link with the cosmic and transcendental. Sunaryo seems to be well aware that the timelessness of stone is in contrast with creatures like mortal humans, yet he uses this property to deliver his views of human life.

The concrete walls at the entrance guide the visitors to an isolated place. *Father's and Mother's Stone* welcomes the visitor, symbolizing the start of life by being born into this world from the connection of the parents. The text 'Iqra' in the praying room means 'Read', telling the visitors to open their minds and read every sign in *Wot Batu*. Through *Stage of Life*, Sunaryo delivers his view on human life as a journey. We find *Stone of Mother* on a pedestal, as we start life in our mother's womb. The second installation, *Mandala Stone*, refers to Buddhism. It conceptualizes the relationship between humans and the cosmic system. The last stone in the *Stage of Life* installation is *Boat Stone*, which looks like a ship that sails to *Water Stone*, or death, on the edge. Sunaryo says that *Water Stone* shows his view on mortality as something reflective, quiet, a blank end, a way for humans to unite with the universe. Walking through *Wot Batu's* sequence feels like a journey through a Zen Garden, which uses the experience of walking through a garden as a metaphor for the journey of life. Both gardens end in a rest area, an emptiness [10].

Sunaryo's instinct to arrange the space into a multisensory experience seems always to be on point. For example in the entrance alley, where visitors can hear the rattling sound of the pebbles when stepped on, as if he wanted to introduce the stones to the visitors audially, even though we all know stones are inanimate objects. In *Contemplation Stone*, the visitor can sit on the stone, feeling the coldness of the stone, protected by the Bayan tree overhead. The Bayan tree is in the same family as the Bodhi tree, a symbol of the cosmos in Hinduism. By arranging this situation, Sunaryo unconsciously seems to put the visitors in an experience like the spiritual awakening of Siddharta Gautama.

The formalism Greenberg conveys is that ‘art for art’s sake’ opposes the concept of religion. Sunaryo brings spiritualism and conceptualism to religion through his formalist art. His teacher, Ahmad Sadali, showed the same propensity. The style could be considered abstract-meditative [6]. Sadali delivered his perspective on eternity and God’s majesty through his paintings. Sunaryo’s colleague, A.D. Pirous, was also interested in spirituality in art. Sunaryo’s relationship with both may have influenced his views. Sunaryo has produced some other art works that contain spiritual messages. In the Thawaf series, he already showed his thoughts on his own religiosity through centered repetitive circles. In *Batu, Air dan Kayu* he also explored spiritualism through similar natural elements as shown in *Wot Batu* on a larger scale.

Sunaryo found the inner pulsation emanating from his subconsciousness in repetitive lines; this relates to spirituality. The repetitive circles are found in Buddhist mandalas. The movement of *tawaf*, walking around the Kabah, repetitive phrases to praise God, and other spiritual practices are also done repetitively. As one of the formalist art aspects found in *Wot Batu*, balance also relates to concepts in some beliefs. In some of the installations, such as *Father’s and Mother’s Stone*, *Between the Earth and the Sky*, Sunaryo brings the concept of dualism to his works. Both installations have two contrasting elements, which can also relate to *lingga yoni* or *yin and yang* in Eastern beliefs.

3.4.1 Evaluation

In contrast to Sunaryo’s previous work *Monumen Perjuangan Rakyat Jawa Barat* (MPRJB), *Wot Batu* was inspired by his own eagerness to make land art. As a monument, MPRJB needed to represent the collective memory of the people of West Java who fought against colonialism. Meanwhile, *Wot Batu* conveys his own thoughts on spiritualism elaborated in a work of land art in West Java [5].

MPRJB is taller and more prominent in scale and proportion, while *Wot Batu* is smaller and broader. The monument is one whole rather than the sequential installation *Wot Batu* located in a natural site. It makes MPRJB looks more magnificent than *Wot Batu*, since MPRJB is a landmark and an icon. However, Sunaryo’s exploration of materials in *Wot Batu* surpasses MPRJB. He combines many different materials in *Wot Batu* while considering its location. His idea to embody multisensory stimulants in this work, which subconsciously make the visitors immerse themselves in it, creating a complete experience rather than only presenting a visual object.

In terms of the materials used, *Wot Batu* outperforms MPRJB. *Wot Batu*’s material, stones, lasts longer and is more eco-friendly than the concrete used in MPRJB. Stones change their color or are overgrown by moss as they are exposed

to natural processes such as rain and sunlight. This makes *Wot Batu* unite with the site and its surrounding nature, increasing its aesthetic qualities. In contrast, MPRJB's white concrete needs high maintenance to preserve its splendor. *Wot Batu* and MPRJB both show solid formalist aspects. However, in understanding *Wot Batu*, visitors need to activate their other senses and think deeper. MPRJB symbolizes the spirit and togetherness of West Java's people. The form of MPRJB consists of repetitive lines shaped like a row of tubular fragments that can be seen as a bamboo forest [12]. Meanwhile in *Wot Batu*, for example in the alley, the visitor needs to walk over pebbles first, and they can immediately experience the message of the art work. It is understandable why more aesthetic qualities of Sunaryo's work, including fingerprints, machinery, and video, are incorporated in *Wot Batu* since it is more recent than MPRJB. Through *Wot Batu*, Sunaryo can be considered more mature as an artist.

4 Conclusion

Sunaryo's ability to cultivate his thoughts on the life of humans and their relationship with other creatures and the greater power of the universe is exemplified in *Wot Batu*. At the time he created *Wot Batu*, his age was an understandable reason for his more recent works, which delivered his thoughts on spirituality. His inclination toward formalist art is successfully intertwined with spirituality, showing that Greenberg's statement on formalist art being apart from religion is indisputable. These skills Sunaryo possesses may have been influenced by his life experience as a student of Ahmad Sadali and friend of A.D. Pirous and other artists in DECENTA.

Sunaryo applied various aspects, such as the use of stones, wind directions, method, harmony between space and materials, the aesthetic qualities of formalist art, and a multisensory experience, to deliver his perspective on spirituality. Thus, he brings the visitor subconsciously into a deeper understanding. His spiritual perspective includes the human life cycle, death and mortality, the universe, and the higher power of the universe.

Compared to Sunaryo's previous work that intertwined with architecture, *Wot Batu* outperforms his previous work in terms of materials used, the experience of the visitor, and other qualities. *Wot Batu* shows him as a mature artist who is open to using current technology to support him in expressing his moral view on being human.

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