

A Heritage To Open More Conversations, The Case Of Ida Bagus Njana's Dewi Pertiwi Sculptures

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In the midst of the 2020 pandemic, an intriguing writing project landed. It was uncertain how it could be done with all the restrictions, as the project requires involvement of a heritage that needs to be observed directly. Yet gradually it leads to encouraging better understanding of our position as humans in this current situation. The heritage was Ida Bagus Njana's sculptures. Njana is a well-known sculptor from Mas Village, Ubud, Gianyar, Bali. His works have been said to be the start of modern Balinese sculptures, especially his wood works. Very little of his works still exist in Bali, namely in his own family museum Njana Tilem Museum, then Museum Puri Lukisan, Pura Taman Pule temple, and Taman Werdhi Budaya. Existing writings on Njana lie in the existence of Pita Maha, the community or group of painters and sculptures in the 1930s. However, when conversations took place with his family in 2020, Njana's sculptures were not merely an artwork to be sold, it's filled with spiritual thinking and expressions. His works with the title "Dewi Pertiwi" (meaning: Goddess of Earth) are filled with surrealism - not only its elegant carved shapes being different from the traditional Balinese methods, but also its mysterious narration about the Goddess itself. It was later observed that these narrations were not that mysterious. It actually came from Njana's knowledge from scriptures (*lontar*), which means he really thought through what he was expressing about the Goddess of Earth narratives. These "Dewi Pertiwi" sculptures speak of the environment and earth that we live in and serve as somewhat reminders. This then inspired us to continue the conversation of appreciating and understanding these narrations with our current life. And interestingly landed as a curatorial project "Pertiwi" with the theme resilience in a form of website, where Njana's Dewi Pertiwi sculptures were part of its starting point.

Keywords: Balinese art, sculpture, heritage, media art

Introduction

Ida Bagus Njana (1912-1985) (from now on referred to as Nyana) comes from Desa Mas, Ubud, Gianyar, Bali, Indonesia. Today, we can still see his house with the plaque "Galeri Njana Tilem - Ida Bagus Njana & Son Ida Bagus Tilem - Mas" (read: Njana Tilem Gallery) in the area. Njana is known to have a profound impact on Balinese art history, prominently as a wood sculptor. Until before the 2020 pandemic hit, his house was still crowded by tourists looking for the finest wooden sculptures done by his family's artisans.

During his lifetime, Njana's works are on the market and would be sold in many souvenir shops in Denpasar that have existed since the 1920s. In Ubud, the founding of Pita Maha opened markets as well, where Njana's works would be one of those with the highest price with Njana as the maestro of wooden sculptures. It was stated that Walter Spies once interacted with Njana in 1928 where he "suggested Njana to simplify his wood by sanding" which from there Njana found the wood fiber details very intriguing. His style was called *pepulangan* that defines simplicity and pure wood fiber, which then many would follow his way of working afterwards in Desa Mas (Sastrawan, 2020, pp.28). With that, Njana was stated to

have introduced the Balinese sculpture's modern style. Hitherto, Njana's works have been written and inserted in English written books (note: in which English is a global language) of important artworks, such as in *Modern Indonesian Art: from Raden Saleh to the Present Day* (Couteau, 2006) and as a heritage in the renewal of Balinese sculpture in *Indonesian Heritage Series: Visual Art* (Vickers, 2003).

Njana's early sculptures that we could see today in Bali were created in the 1930s, which shows a goddess figure in a sleek form. This contrasts the traditional sculpture style that would have the goddess figure stand straight and its body carved in a certain position. Through previous findings in writing on Ida Bagus Njana for Pusaka Seni Rupa (Sastrawan, 2020), in Bali, it is still typical that depictions of Gods or Goddesses are in traditional forms. As Njana presented Dewi Pertiwi in a *pepulangan* style, gives the perspective that such spiritual belief can be interpreted out of the traditional form or in your own interpretation/expression.

It seems it was his background that shaped his artistic practice. Belonging to the Brahmana caste, Njana's daily lives would involve religious rituals. This included making offerings (*banten*), religious statues (*pratima*), and dance

masks (*tapel*). He also served God through religious ceremony dance (*tari wali*) such as the Tari Wayang Wong and as a traditional Balinese architect (*undagi*) which includes wood and stone carving in different temples. He also works on his sculptures and carvings based on the *hari baik* or *hari dewasa* (read: good day) based on the Balinese calendar. Njana did not have a formal education, thus his source of knowledge comes from reading scriptures (*lontar*). Hence the themes of his sculptures would include such spiritual influences, specifically on the Goddess of Earth (*Dewi Pertiwi*) that he created several times.

Therefore, it seems that Njana's artworks' importance is not just how he successfully became the maestro with the highest price sold, rather it is about what he expressed has significant messages. In which "through his *pepulungan* style on the wood [he sculpted], Ida Bagus Njana reveals an expression and important meaning to our life through the virtue value which he grew up in" (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 56). Njana's works seem to encourage those interested to observe more or find out more of his reasons for depicting Dewi Pertiwi than other Gods or Goddesses.

Incidentally, the notion of Dewi Pertiwi becomes an intriguing matter that could be explored further in art practices, including in curatorial works. As curator Kamiliah Bahdar (Singapore) and I were accepted in a curator online residency titled "Virtual Workings" for South East Asian emerging curators, co-developed by the Japan Foundation, Bangkok and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), we elaborated the given theme "Resilience" to become "Pertiwi" (read: Mother Earth).

Our initial ideas came from two matters that were our current researches - Ida Bagus Njana's "Dewi Pertiwi" artworks from Bali and sacred rice dishes in Malay tradition from Singapore. The commonality of these notions lie in "to look at the theme of resilience through the lens of culture and spiritualism within the context of Bali and Singapore" rather than just as an act of quick recovery and as "the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape". As a beginning, we decided to use "Pertiwi" as the title of the project as it is the "common thread" of interest in Dewi Pertiwi as Mother Earth and "the national personification of Indonesia and Malaysia". From here, we then looked through it by "the different lens of culture, spirituality and environment" (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2021). Hitherto, the heritage of Njana's "Dewi Pertiwi" sculptures open up further conversations for us today.

METHOD

To know more about Ida Bagus Njana's works, we should observe them directly. One of the challenges is that there are not many of Njana's works for public view in Bali. According to Njana's grandson, Ida Bagus Alit Suryadi, the Director of Njana Tilem Museum, this was due to

many of his works done from the 1930s up to 1950s being sold all over the globe, and only by 1963 or 1964, Njana stopped selling his works (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 34). Another challenge is that the research took place during the 2020 pandemic beginnings, thus restrictions took place and access to the works are not available at all times. Luckily, the places where we can see his works today allowed researchers to observe and document his works. They are: his own family museum Njana Tilem Museum, then Museum Puri Lukisan, Pura Taman Pule temple (all in Ubud), and Taman Werdhi Budaya Bali (or known as Art Center in Denpasar).

Interestingly we could find two Njana's "Dewi Pertiwi" wooden sculptures in two different places. The one created in 1933 at Museum Puri Lukisan and one created in 1968 at Taman Werdhi Budaya. The 1933 sculpture was said to be filled with surrealism and said to have mysterious narration (Vickers, 2003; Couteau, 1999). It was later observed that these narrations were not that mysterious. As previously stated, it actually came from Njana's knowledge from scriptures (*lontar*). This means he really thought through what he was expressing in his sculptures including about the Goddess of Earth narratives that have existed.

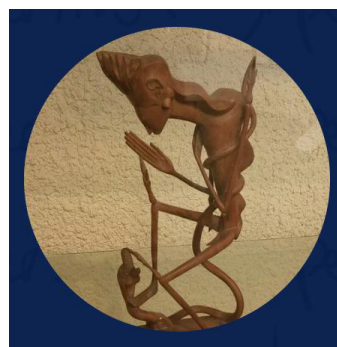


Figure 1. Dewi Pertiwi, 1933, Ida Bagus Njana at Museum Puri Lukisan

Source: Pertiwi - Fertility, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/fertility>

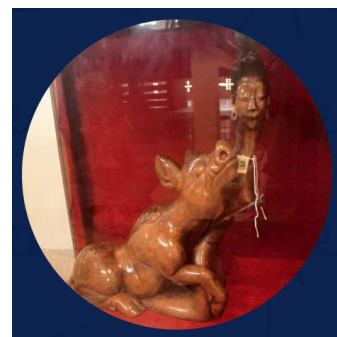


Figure 2. Dewi Pertiwi, 1968, Ida Bagus Njana at Taman Werdhi Budaya

Source: Pertiwi - Fertility, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/fertility>

The 1933 sculpture had the figure of Dewi Pertiwi tangled with a kind of snake. Yet, it was later confirmed by Udayana University Balinese Literature lecturer, Putu Eka Guna Yasa, that the snake could be a depiction of a dragon (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 24). Guna Yasa thinks that this “Dewi Pertiwi” sculpture was inspired by Kakawin Rama Tantra, the ending part of Ramayana story that has “rarely been told” in which,

Sita or Sinta was doubted of her faithfulness to husband Rama by the people. She then proved it by calling Dewi Pertiwi by stomping the earth three times, and then a dragon appeared from the core of the earth to pick her up and bring her to Dewi Pertiwi forever... Sita comes from “Sitisundari” which means pertiwi [known as earth or soil from Ancient Javanese language] (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 24-26).

The 1968 sculpture had the figure of Dewi Pertiwi with a boar. It was inspired by the Kakawin Bomantaka story, which tells a story of Bhoma, the son of Dewi Pertiwi and God Vishnu (*Dewa Wisnu*) that has a scary form. Dewa Wisnu who manifested as a boar met and fell in love with Dewi Pertiwi on earth during a challenge by God Shiva (*Dewa Siwa*) to find the bottom of his *lingga*. Bhoma was then born, which today is very well known to be the guardian of many temples as he is carved as the ornament on its entrance gate. This story is an allegory on how the boar or Dewa Wisnu, known for his symbol as water, went to dig the earth of Dewi Pertiwi to create life and fertility. Hence Bhoma, the son, as a symbol of the forests grew and always in need of water (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 56).

Another Dewi Pertiwi interpretation that we could find is in Njana’s family’s temple located in his house or Njana Tilem Gallery. Here, it is not as a sculpture, rather as part of the temple’s stone carving and uncommonly placed on the bottom. Here he is not working as a sculptor but as the *undagi*. According to Suryadi, “Njana is a ‘pure’ artist who has high understanding in spiritualism” thus here Dewi Pertiwi is shaped “as if carrying the family’s temple, reminding its existence as the earth”, hence Njana has been very imaginative and has his own interpretation as an *undagi* (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 17). The recurrence of this Dewi Pertiwi as the Goddess of Earth or Mother Earth narrations show that this belief is important to Njana.

Therefore, based on these previous findings, Njana was not far from the literature he was reading as inspiration and has his own way of expressing it in a three dimensional form (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 26). While from the two sculptures as modern art entities, we could see that one of the pieces of knowledge that Njana wants to pass through, “reflects the importance of protecting the earth’s fertility... created from the union of water and earth, and without it there won’t be the nature ecosystem that we could live in” (Sastrawan, 2020, pp. 56). These “Dewi Pertiwi”

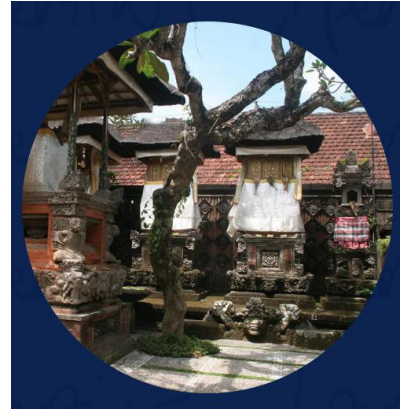


Figure 3. Dewi Pertiwi carving in Njana’s family temple

Source: Pertiwi - Fertility, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/fertility>

sculptures speak of the environment and earth that we live in and serve as somewhat reminders.

There was then an opportunity to try and develop further the notion of the *reminders* through a curatorial residency with a partner. The Virtual Workings residency involved mentoring from a senior curator and for the theme *Resilience* we had Luckana Kunavichayanont from Bangkok, Thailand. Here we were asked to explore the theme and what could be a possible contemporary outcome as the theme also reflects the current pandemic situation. Thus, as curators filled with curiosities, we did research and jot down our notes using different virtual tools such as Padlet, Google Sheets, and Google Docs. As Bahdar and I are very invested in language, we decided to start by compiling visuals alongside words that we think reflect on *Resilience*.

We then discovered,

...to be resilient is to understand what has existed in the past that accords to the nature we live in and our well-being. Yet, we are also aware about how wellness and mindfulness has itself become a commercial industry, and expectations of resilience can unfairly fall on the individual. And so, we wanted to centre relationships in our understanding of resilience: that our resilience and well-being was about mutual interdependence with others and our environment, and that subsequently to focus on forms and acts of collective care (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2021).

From that, we realised that conversations should take place with our art communities as to how residencies would occur. However, due to the pandemic situation and with all its ever changing restrictions, we then opened it up to doing it online by creating a questionnaire/survey in two languages - English and Bahasa Indonesia. The questionnaire was done with Google Forms which helped us in guiding making questions and retrieving the data by the hour. We focused on the data to come from different

artists, curators and cultural workers in Asian countries. We wanted to get a picture of how they have been affected by the recent events due to the pandemic. We sent the link to the questionnaire/survey directly to our friends and colleagues, also through ASEF and promoted it on our social media. The questions asked were related to our theme resilience, along with well-being and collective care, which then further our research as it added more references for the existing glossaries, such as,

...their experiences in the past year, how the pandemic has or hasn't affected their lives and practice, how they have taken care of themselves, forms of community care they have observed, and what resilience has come to mean to them (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2021).

With finding a new curatorial concept for this residency joining hand in hand with the result of respondents coming from different cities and countries, it also conveys a form of transcultural memory. Being transcultural involves "the search for new modes of interrogating contemporary cultural experience" which "has both an interdisciplinary and a global reach" (Bond & Rapson, 2014, pp. 8). Understanding the pandemic is global and reaching the collective care as part of being resilient, having this transcultural memory demonstrated "how shared co-ordinates (be they historical, cultural, political or economic) may ease competitive claims of history" (Bond & Rapson, 2014, pp. 19). This also ties in with the shared coordinates of histories on *Dewi Pertiwi* beliefs across Asia, where we are focusing for our respondents. With this commonality we believe we could speak to each other of our views of resilience through the variety of lenses in culture, spirituality and environment. Therefore, the shape of the curatorial product (in synthesizing the data) we decided on a virtual one, in the form of a website. It is hoped with this form we could reach more people in this time of time in sharing thoughts to each other and spreading the "Pertiwi" inspiration further.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaire/survey that took place for "Pertiwi" were very interesting. We were surprised that some of our communities were willing to share their moments during the pandemic for this project even though we cannot meet in person. Those who filled it in are not only our friends and colleagues but also those we do not know and received the link. With it we managed to have a picture on how artists, curators and cultural workers in Asian countries have been resilient of the pandemic effects.

We received 30 respondents in the span of time of around two weeks. They are from four different countries of residence: Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan and Nepal. They come from different cities/provinces: Bali, Banda Aceh, Bandung, Jakarta, Magelang, Yogyakarta, Kathmandu, Singapore and Taipei.

Participants' residence in Asia (30 Participants)

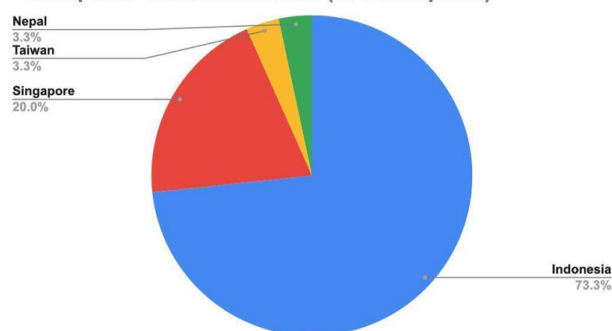


Figure 4. Respondents' profile countries

Source: Resilience/Pertiwi Questionnaire by Kamiliyah Bahdar and Savitri Sastrawan

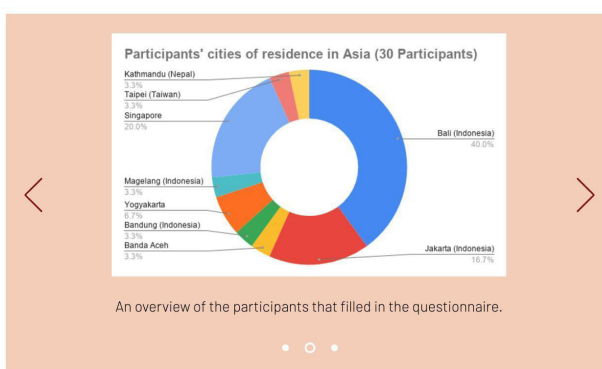


Figure 5. Respondents' profile cities

Source: Pertiwi - About Us, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/about-us>

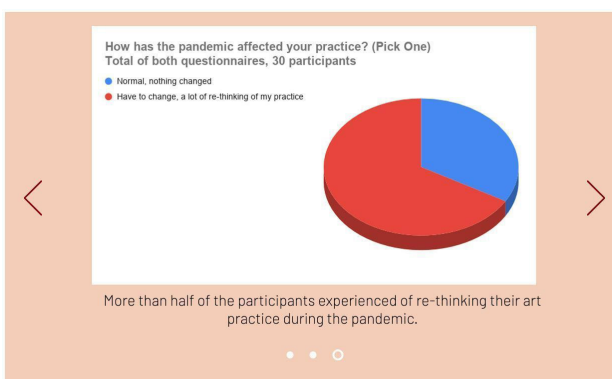


Figure 6. Respondents' answer percentage

Source: Pertiwi - About Us, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/about-us>

One of the important questions we asked was how has the pandemic affected the respondent's practice in art. Intriguingly, not everyone had to change their practice even though the majority had to rethink.

Another item that we think is important to bring up are the answers to the question, "What are some forms of community care you came across, and/or wished you had access to?" And some of the answers are,

"Open honest dialogues and sharing, alongside counselling sessions, emotional intelligence workshop and mindfulness classes would be perfect." (Respondent from Singapore)

"If there's a good thing about this pandemic is that it brings sense of togetherness, that we're not dealing with this hardship alone." (Respondent from Jakarta)

These statements show the forms of community care that occurs and hoped for due to the pandemic which reflects back to the transcultural memory notion. Throughout the pandemic, we know that we were encouraged to isolate ourselves at most times. With physical interactions held at a minimum, thus these thoughts shared in a digital age gives us a picture that resilience through collective care took place and a positive movement to continue. Therefore, we hoped what we created in this residency could be an inspiration and motivation for other art workers and the public.

From all the data collected we decided to form the website to be continuously updated. Thus, it is not like a conventional exhibition that only exists within a time span. During the residency we were asked to update our progress every week by producing a post to be shared for the @culture360_asef Instagram. As this is a result of a residency, we decided to use some of those ready materials alongside information from the initial idea of the curatorial project to be inserted to the website.

We wanted to make it as interactive as possible, so we provide a Linktree which holds the website's link and documentation from Virtual Workings. Once you click the Pertiwi Website button, you will reach the homepage with our video post thus it catches your attention as if you enter an exhibition. The video shows the meeting of Njana's sculptural depictions of "Dewi Pertiwi" and cooking pulut kuning,

...to us it embodied the encounter in finding more ingredients to explore what could be the resilience to be offered to the public audience in this time of times. Within it, we inserted selected words from the glossary we have built, connecting the dots further in developing our theme (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2020).

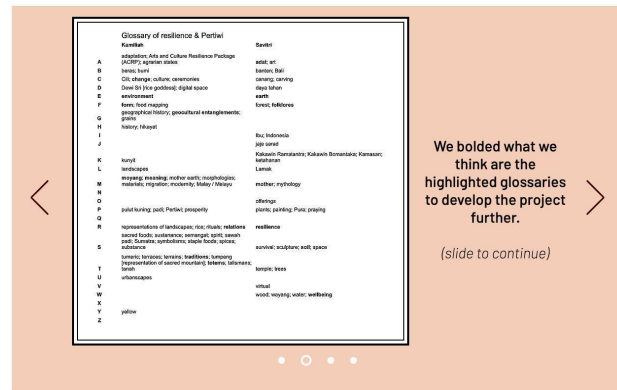


Figure 7. Glossary of Resilience and Pertiwi by Kamiliyah Bahdar and Savitri Sastrawan on Google Sheets

Source: Pertiwi - About Us, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/about-us>

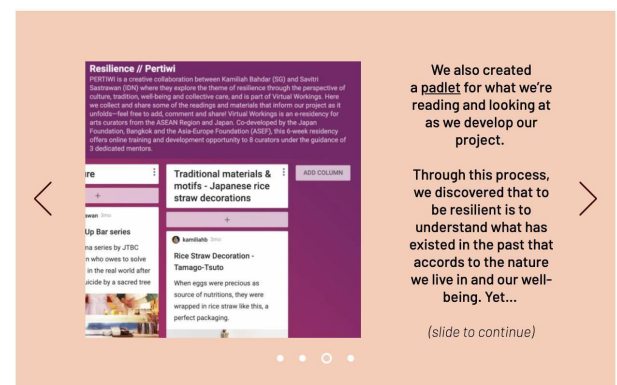


Figure 8. Video capture of the Padlet on notes for Resilience and Pertiwi by Kamiliyah Bahdar and Savitri Sastrawan

Source: Pertiwi - About Us, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/about-us>

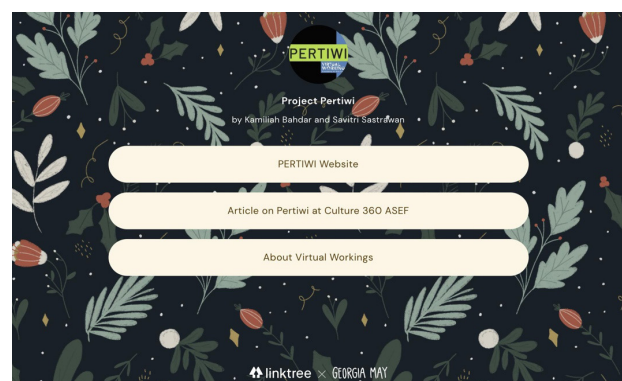


Figure 9. Pertiwi Linktree

Source: Pertiwi - Linktree, <https://linktr.ee/virtualrp>

We developed two main menus: Glossaries and Activities. We decided to form Glossaries to consist of words that are about "Pertiwi" that we share to the public. We formed it like a dictionary of words yet with interactivity like a mindmap. We also divide them in sub categories and it is still in progress, such as: Pertiwi as Totem, Well-being, and Resilience through collective care. Here each word becomes its own link to click on where on certain words

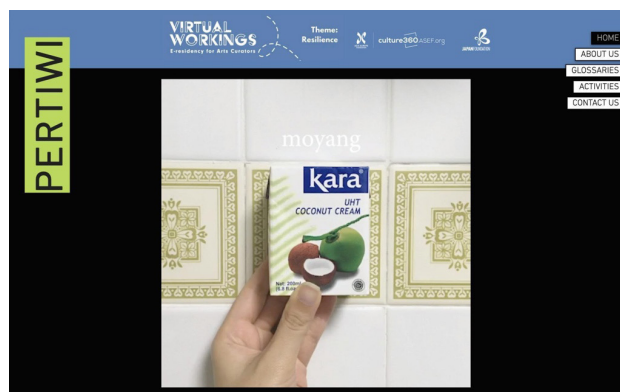


Figure 10. Video capture of the homepage of Pertiwi
Source: Pertiwi - Homepage, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi>



Figure 11. Glossaries main page in "Pertiwi"
Source: Pertiwi - Glossaries, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/glossaries>

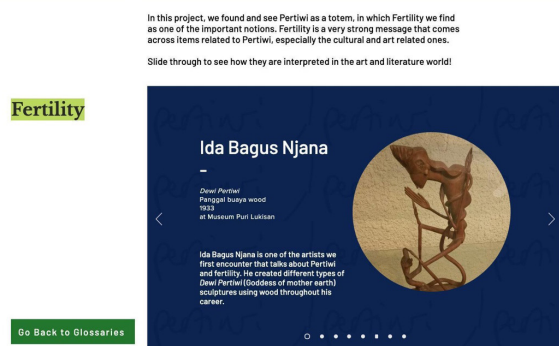


Figure 12. "Fertility" webpage in "Pertiwi"
Source: Pertiwi - Fertility, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/ferility>

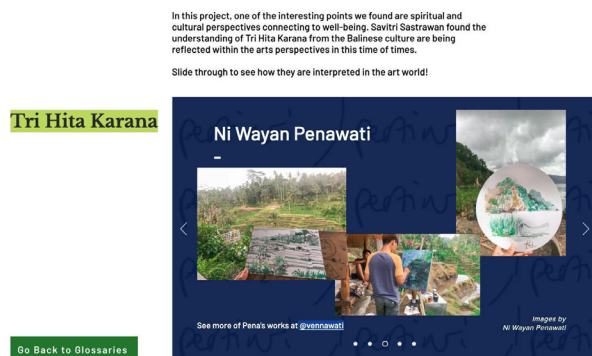


Figure 13. "Tri Hita Karana" webpage in "Pertiwi" - Penawati's activity
Source: Pertiwi - Tri Hita Karana, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/tri-hita-karana>

you can find related artists' artworks. For example if you click on "Fertility", you will find what is "Fertility" and the related artworks to scroll on. While in "Resilience" or "Ketahanan" you will find a variety of understanding of the word in this pandemic from the respondents. In a way, it is like an online exhibition where you get to learn about "Pertiwi" in your own time.

An example from the glossary that was inspired by the questionnaire/survey results was the word "Tri Hita Karana". Here we were inspired by Bali based artist Unclejoy and Balinese artist Ni Wayan Penawati sharing the activities/artworks they created during the pandemic which they stated is related to this notion. Tri Hita Karana "means *three causes of happiness*. It is resulted from the harmonic relationship and balance between humans and its surroundings - the good relationship with God, the good relationship with humans, and the good relationship with nature" (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2021).

Penawati described "resilience has three topics of relationship between God, humans and the environment, along with oneself's. All of these connect to the realisation of spirituality, health, and communication from oneself's as well" which reflects Tri Hita Karana. While Unclejoy, got inspired by Tri Hita Karana for one of his new works in 2020 titled "Balance". Unclejoy stated, "to be resilient and for our well-being, we should learn better, looking back to our inner selves, while trying to balance our life with the nature, the people and God" (Bahdar & Sastrawan, 2021). Therefore, we group their artworks/activities under the "Tri Hita Karana" link.

In Activities, we provide several activities for anyone to try on and engage with on our website. This menu is part of our notion in platforming wellbeing and resilience through collective care. At the moment we provided: "Pertiwi as Totem", "Share a Glossary", "Pulut Kuning Recipe", "Visit Other Virtual Workings". In "Pertiwi as Totem", we asked the public to share what they think of their totem of Pertiwi, while ours started with Njana's Dewi Pertiwi sculpture and Pulut Kuning rice dish. In "Share a Glossary", we asked the public to share a related word that could be inserted in our current glossaries. In "Pulut Kuning Recipe", we share the recipe in making the dish so the public can try it anytime they want. While "Visit Other Virtual Workings" link to the other themed residencies under Virtual Workings which are "Clearing Histories" and "Reading Textiles and Weaving New Narratives".

Though the residency is completed, the website is still in the process of growing further. During the pandemic, having alternatives to the digital world mostly became a new way of working, the same with the "Pertiwi" project. Of course, hiccups might occur and more promotion might be needed so that it could engage more and more viewers. However, when we had our positive feedback from our

mentor and ASEF of “Pertiwi” website, it shows how this project could be a potential way of curatorial working in the present and the future.

CONCLUSION

With the “Pertiwi” website in hand, it shows the possibility of exploring the notion of Dewi Pertiwi narrations into different art forms such as Njana’s modern sculptures. On the other hand, the importance of the narration to be told again to the public and possibly the younger generation, could create another impact of inspiration and positivity, especially of what’s happening today. Opening up a conversation such as through the “Pertiwi” process of creation and its product, would be able to continue more conversations later on.

Another view that occurred is how a heritage could be explored in a digital form. Of course, such a thing might have existed through different museums or institutions creating their own educational activities through digital forms inside their buildings or by their website, yet exploring it today as an independent curator with digital access provided gives almost unlimited ways of how we look at curatorial. It can be the alternative from having physical exhibitions or events and created as interactive as it can be. “Pertiwi” becomes an exhibition, an activity, an event and so on. Thus “Pertiwi” itself becomes interdisciplinary and probably more friendly compared to a proper art exhibition.

However, being able to process Njana’s sculptures to have further conversation in this pandemic time is a surprise in itself with its surprising developments. As stated above, with narrations on the importance of fertility in our life, specifically of our natural environment, and how this pandemic started due to human’s exploitation of wildlife, the notion really serves as a *reminder*. Therefore, expressing this in a curatorial way through ideas of collective care conversing with art workers leads to an alternative knowledge to be told to the public. Hoping this won’t be the last of being able to open more conversations from heritages that existed and could be an inspiration to all independent curators in the arts.

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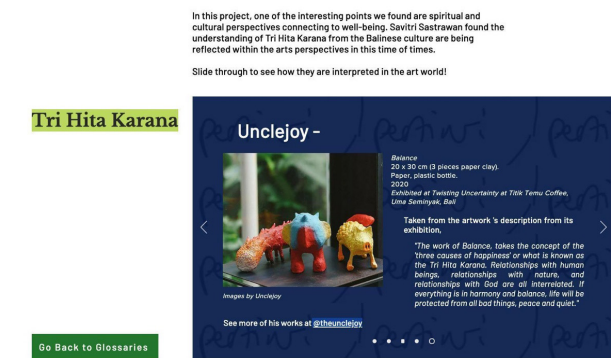


Figure 14. “Tri Hita Karana” webpage in “Pertiwi” - Unclejoy’s “Balance”

Source: Pertiwi - Tri Hita Karana, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/tri-hita-karana>

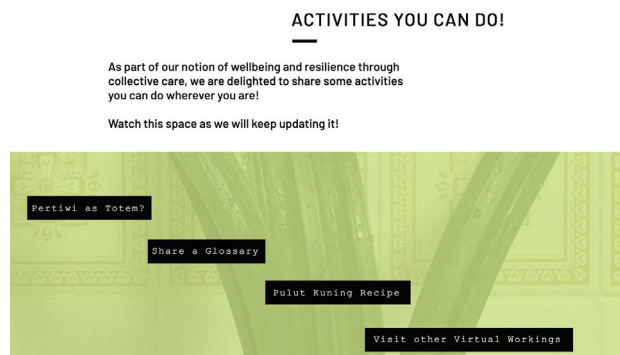


Figure 15. Activities webpage in “Pertiwi”

Source: Pertiwi - Activities, <https://virtualrp20.wixsite.com/pertiwi/activities>

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