

Images and Words

The Voice of Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary works expose histories of oppression, resistance, and national identity, giving voice to those silenced by colonialism and authoritarianism. While his influence on literature is widely acknowledged, its intersection with contemporary visual art remains underexplored. This article examines how text-based artistic practices reinterpret and extend Pramoedya's legacy, using layering, erasure, and fragmentation as visual metaphors for censorship and resilience. Drawing on cognitive theory, expression theory, and visual semiotics, the artistic process integrates his words into images of painting and mixed media to create a dialogue between past and present, literature and image, memory and erasure. The findings reveal that visualizing literary narratives deepens historical reflection and challenges cultural amnesia. This study contributes to both artistic and academic discourse by showing how contemporary art can reclaim silenced histories and expand Pramoedya's influence beyond literature into the realm of visual expression.

KEYWORDS

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, text-based art, historical memory, contemporary art.



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Visual Echoes of Literature

Images and words are powerful tools for expressing deep human struggles, dreams, and resistance. In works inspired by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, his voice, full of courage and clarity, continues to echo through contemporary art. His writings, once silenced by censorship, now inspire visual artists to speak boldly about history, identity, and human dignity. Through brushstrokes and composition, artists respond to his legacy, turning literature into living visual memory. These artworks do not merely illustrate his texts; they open new spaces for dialogue, reflection, and creative resistance. A meaningful way to appreciate visual art is by taking time to observe it, reflect on its meaning, and discuss it with others [1]. The relationship between literature and visual art has long been a subject of interdisciplinary exploration, especially in contemporary practices where text functions as a conceptual, parodic, and aesthetic tool [2]. Ideas, symbols, and emotions found in literature often emerge in visual art, even without direct

reference—both art forms may walk side by side, occasionally meet, yet remain distinct in their modes of expression [3].

In such works, images are not only seen but read—they become *verbal-visual*, revealing how visual culture can shape thought as deeply as language itself [4] [5]. Media artists frequently use language not just to express emotion or metaphor, but to create physical and sensory experiences that engage the viewer's perception [6] [7]. Text-based art, including graffiti, uses written language as a central visual element [8]. This approach gained prominence in the 20th century through movements like Dada, Conceptual Art, and feminist art. Artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer used text to explore questions of meaning, identity, and power. Often, this form of art serves to challenge social norms, resist censorship, and express political critique [9] [10].

This study explores how reading and seeing can work together, making language a tool not only for creative expression but also for critical thinking. In contemporary art, especially in works that deal with politics and social issues, text-based art has become an important method. Artists often use text to engage with questions of power, memory, and resistance. One key figure whose writing connects deeply to these themes is Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006), one of Indonesia's most influential writers. His stories of injustice, colonialism, censorship, and the lives of ordinary people continue to resonate today. Written during times of political oppression, including his own long imprisonment, Pramoedya's works stand as strong voices of resistance and truth-telling. While his writings have been widely studied in literature, history, and political studies, their influence on contemporary visual art is still rarely discussed.

In recent years, many visual artists in Indonesia and Southeast Asia have taken inspiration from Pramoedya's themes. They explore issues like silenced voices, forgotten histories, and resistance to power through painting, installation, video, and performance.

This study raises three main questions: How can text-based visual art reinterpret the meaning and impact of Pramoedya's work? How does the artist's creative process help viewers connect emotionally and intellectually with his words? And how can using Pramoedya's writing in art be a way to challenge historical forgetting and censorship in postcolonial society? To answer these questions, this research looks at how visual artists use techniques like layering, erasure, and fragmentation to reflect themes of silence, memory, and national identity. It also explores how the act of making this kind of art invites deeper thinking and emotional connection from the audience.

In doing so, this article offers a fresh perspective. It shows that while Pramoedya's influence is well known in literature and history, his voice is also being kept alive and reimagined in visual art. This connection between literature and visual art creates a new kind of dialogue, one that continues his message of resistance, justice, and memory

in powerful and creative ways. Changes in society and dominant ideologies play a big role in shaping policies and subject content at the official level, while the strong separation within the Art subject itself largely affects how content is chosen and taught in classrooms [11].

Text as Artistic Medium

Contemporary art draws from religion, philosophy, puppetry traditions, and engages with many different social and political issues, blending them into modern forms to create new meanings and provoke reflection [12] [13] [14]. As a practicing artist and researcher, the artist creates experimental art that combines images and words, often with a therapeutic purpose. This approach becomes especially meaningful during times of being far from home, separated from family, or when experiencing feelings of freedom, longing, or uncertainty. Such situations echo the experience of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who wrote his works amid isolation, political exile, and emotional pressure. It was within these harsh conditions that his writing emerged as a form of resistance, memory, and hope. Text not only conveys messages, but also sparks creativity and opens up new possibilities for limitless ideas. Text as an image or Text-to-image generative models are a modern and strong method for creating visual art [15].

Text-based art is a type of contemporary art that uses words and language as the main part of the artwork. It first appeared in the early 1900s and became more popular in the 1960s. This kind of art was a response to Abstract Expressionism and focused more on the creative process than on hidden or personal meanings. Words in art have taken many forms, from old handwritten books to modern art installations, showing a strong and lasting connection between language and visual images. In many traditional cultures, text was also included in paintings as calligraphy, such as in Chinese, Arabic, and Balinese art. This shows how language and visual beauty were often combined. Today, text-based art continues to grow and is often used to talk about social and cultural issues. It remains a powerful way for artists to express ideas through both words and images.

Using text in visual art breaks the usual rules between writing and pictures. It opens new ways to look at history. Instead of reading in a straight line, viewers are invited to explore and find meaning on their own. This shows how shared memories are often broken and incomplete. It also gives space to remember and honor voices that were once ignored. One strong example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech, given on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In front of over 250,000 people, he spoke about a future where people are judged by their character, not by their skin color. His speech became a key moment in the civil rights movement in the United States. It helped lead to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights

Act of 1965. Even today, King's message of justice and equality still inspires people everywhere. This speech was shown at the Water Park of the University of South Florida. It deeply touched the artist, who then created an artwork in 1997 (Fig. 1). While living far from home, in quiet and alone, the artist felt a deep longing for self, for meaning, and for *taksu*, the spiritual power that gives life purpose (Fig. 2). These feelings were turned into a visual artwork, turning personal thoughts into images.

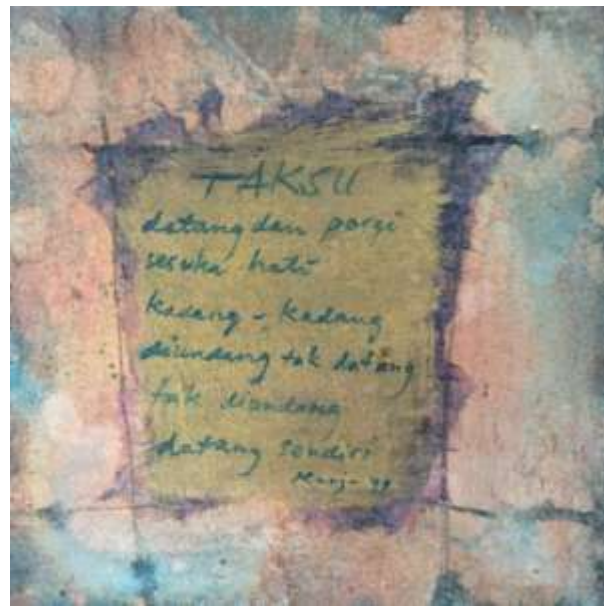
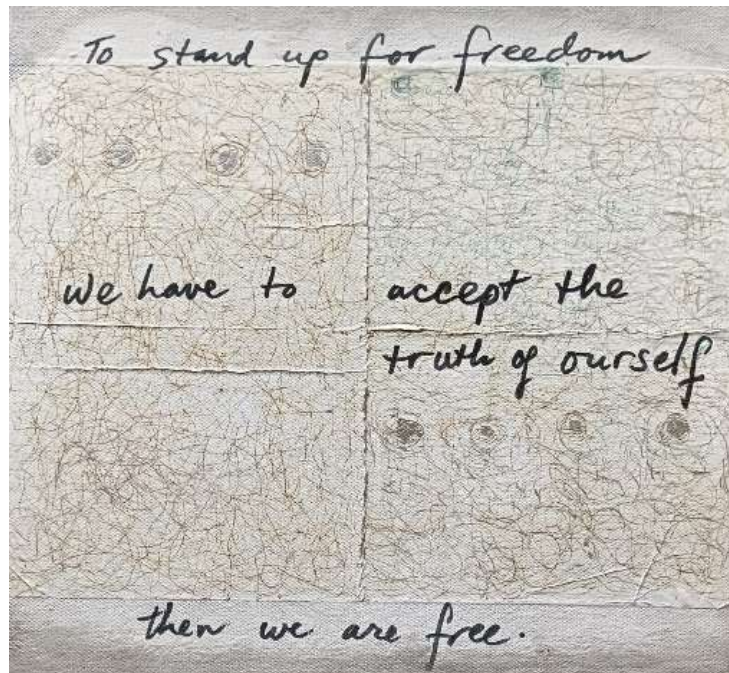
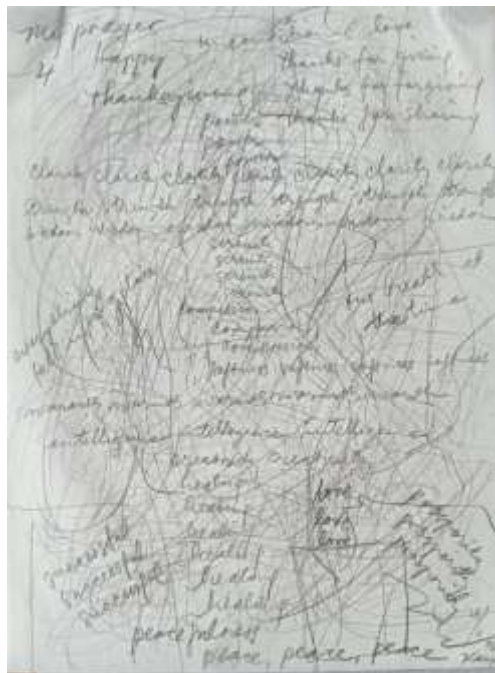
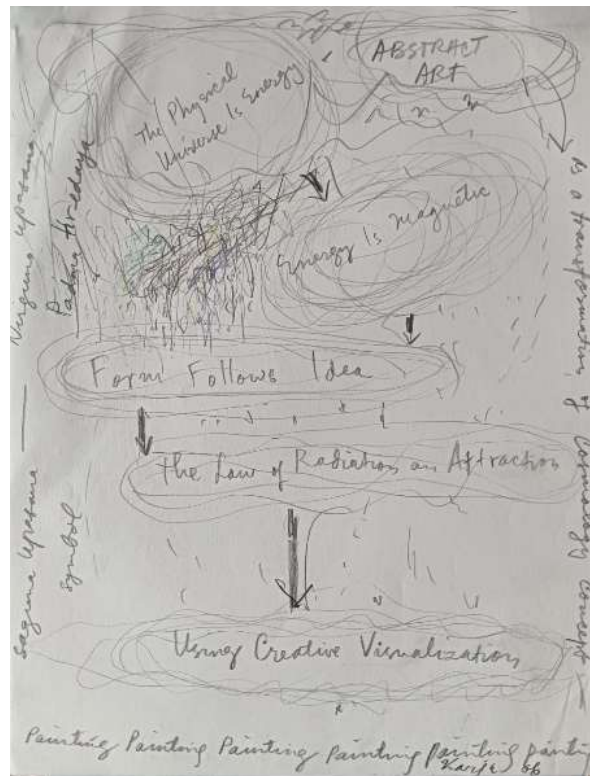
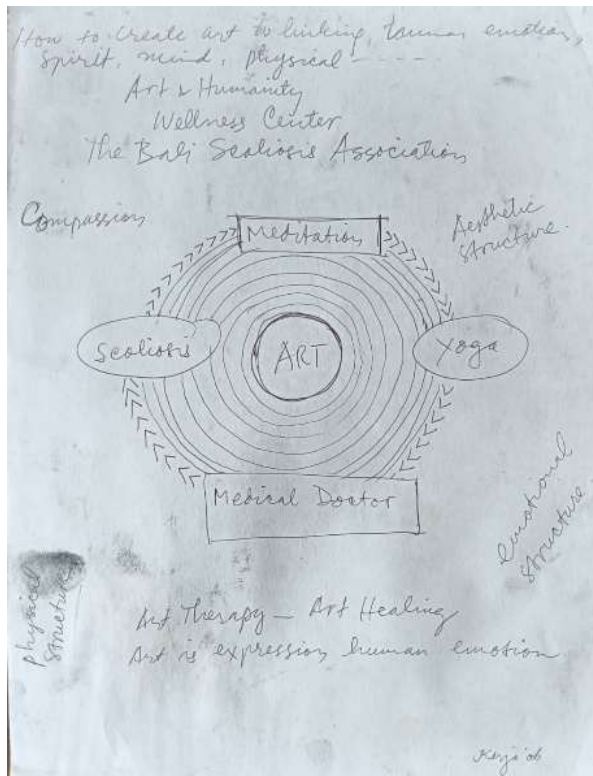


Figure 1. Wayan Karja, 1997. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream."

Figure 2. Wayan Karja, 1999. Taksu.

(Photos by I Wayan Karja, 2025).

This study is based on the idea that text-based art can be used to speak out against injustice. Artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger show how words in art can be strong tools to question power. Their work, shown in public spaces, helps inspire new ways of turning stories like those by Pramoedya into visual art. From a theory point of view [16], words in art are more than just words. When they are broken, covered, or mixed with images, they can mean many things. This kind of art questions official history and opens space for new voices and meanings [17]. The artist's sketches made while waiting in the hospital are similar to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's writings during his time in prison. Both were created in hard times, when the body was weak, but the mind was still active. Pramoedya didn't have paper or pen at first, so he shared his stories by speaking to others. His writing became a way to hold on to memory, identity, and hope. In the same way, the artist's drawings in Notes from Saint Petersburg, Florida (2006) turn pain and waiting into something meaningful. Both works use creative expression to deal with suffering. They show that even in silence and difficulty, words and images can help people understand themselves and resist being forgotten.



Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6. Wayan Karja, 2006. Notes from Saint Petersburg, Florida. (Original photographs taken by I Wayan Karja, 2025).



Figure 7 and 8. Harsono, F. X. (2011). *Writing in the Rain* [Video installation].
 FX Harsono Official Website. <https://fxharsono.art/exhibition/writing-in-the-rain/>
 Screen shot from *Writing in the Rain*.

Since the fall of the Soeharto regime, Chinese Indonesians have become more accepted. However, prejudice and negative stereotypes still continue. FX Harsono's artwork *Writing in the Rain* (2011) shows this problem, using disappearing text to reflect the loss of identity and erased history. This theme connects to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's spirit of *perlawanan*, or resistance. Both use art to speak out against injustice and give voice to those who have been silenced.

This study builds on three big ideas; being, knowing, and values, to explore how art can bring meaning to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's work. Cognitive theory [18] helps explain how memory and meaning are formed in the mind, which is useful for understanding how Pramoedya's powerful and emotional words can take new shape through visual art. Instead of just reading, artists respond with feeling, using layers, erasure, and fragments to express what those words mean to them. Expression theory [19] supports this idea, art is not just a product, but a process of understanding. Visual social semiotics [20] adds another layer, showing how words and images can carry deep cultural meaning. When artist uses Pramoedya's text, they aren't just quoting, they are asking questions, honoring forgotten stories, and resisting silence. Through this lens, visual art becomes a way to keep his voice alive, speaking of truth, memory, and resistance in new forms. This study takes a practice-based approach, where making art becomes the method of research. Pramoedya's words are transformed into visual artworks, cut, layered, reimagined, to reflect themes like censorship, memory, and protest. Paintings, mixed media, and digital projections blend text with abstract images, creating a conversation between words and visuals. Materials like canvas, paper, and installations help carry these messages beyond reading, turning them into something you can see, feel, and experience.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer: Layering Memory and Meaning

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was born in Blora, Central Java, on February 6, 1925. His mother deeply influenced him, inspiring the strong female characters in his works. He saw her as a symbol of the Indonesian revolution. She passed away from tuberculosis when he was 17. After her death, Pramoedya moved to Jakarta, trained as a radio operator, and worked as a journalist. During Indonesia's fight for independence in 1945, he worked at a radio station and published a magazine. In 1947, the Dutch arrested and imprisoned him. While in prison, he wrote his first novel, *Perburuan (The Fugitive)*, published in 1950. After independence, he became known for his novels and short stories, which explored political conflict, revolution, and social change. His early works blended Javanese language and culture, capturing Indonesia's struggles under colonial rule and beyond. Pramoedya Ananta Toer is one of Indonesia's most influential literary figures, whose works have shaped education, historical consciousness, and nationalism [21]. From 1969 to 1979, Pram wrote four novels that later became known as the Buru Quartet [22]. His writings, particularly the *Buru Quartet*, challenge colonial narratives and authoritarian suppression, offering a voice to those silenced by history. Colonialism was not only a form of social and political oppression, but it also significantly harmed the environment in the colonized regions [23]. Despite being imprisoned and censored, Pramoedya's words endured, continuing to inspire readers and artists alike. His literature serves not only as historical documentation but also as an act of resistance, demonstrating the power of language in shaping collective memory, text and context. This aligns with Stanley Fish's view on the importance of context in the interpretation of texts [24].



Figure 9. Portrait of Pramoedya Ananta Toer
(Source: News Liputan6.com/Abdillah)

While Pramoedya's influence in literature and history is well documented, the connection between his works and contemporary visual art remains an underexplored area. The shift from looking to reading in text-based conceptual art highlights how words, rather than images, become the central medium of expression. This approach not only challenges traditional visual art forms but also opens a dialogue on typography as a key element in shaping meaning and perception [25]. Popular writing about specific artworks is explored in *Digital Art and Meaning*, which offers close readings of diverse examples from various digital art genres [26] [27] pointed out that the art of resistance shows how creative expression can be a powerful tool for activism and social change.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer believed that history and storytelling were essential tools for understanding identity and resisting oppression. His works, rooted in personal experience and Indonesia's turbulent history, reveal untold narratives often silenced by the state. He saw literature as a means to challenge authority and expose injustices, particularly in how power shapes historical memory. In the context of contemporary art, Pramoedya's ideas resonate with artist exploring themes of identity, censorship, and resistance. His emphasis on realism and historical consciousness parallels movements that use art to question dominant narratives and reclaim marginalized voices. His approach aligns with socially engaged art that challenges systemic power while grounding itself in lived experiences. For artist today, Pramoedya's commitment to truth and his ability to weave personal and national histories serve as an inspiration. His refusal to compromise under authoritarian rule and his belief in the transformative power of storytelling offers a model for contemporary art as a form of resistance and social critique.

Reinterpreting Meaning and Impact through Visual Language

This subsection explores how visual artist reinterpret the themes found in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary works such as resistance, injustice, identity, and memory, through text-based art. It discusses artistic strategies like layering, distortion, repetition, and visual metaphor. These methods allow artist to translate written narratives into new visual forms, giving audiences another way to engage with the ideas. By using text as image, these works shift the focus from just reading to experiencing, turning Pramoedya's language into a visual event that invites reflection and questioning. In the light of cultural memory [28], this kind of art becomes a way to resist forgetting. By bringing Pramoedya's suppressed stories into the present, these works help us remember what should not be lost. They invite us to reflect on who we are and where we come from. Drawing from text-based art practices [29], the project moves beyond traditional painting, using installation and digital art to bring literature to life. In doing so, it shows that Pramoedya's words are still alive, still challenging, still resisting, and still inspiring us today.

This discusses how the reinterpretation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary legacy is visually constructed through strategies such as layering, erasure, and fragmentation. Drawing on Cognitive Theory, it explains how these visual choices act as metaphors for memory and perception. The section shows how meaning in the artwork is not fixed, but formed through mental engagement with visual cues, mirroring how readers construct meaning from texts. This part highlights how cognitive processes shape the way audiences "see" Pramoedya's words and how the artist manipulates visual forms to evoke reflection on silence, trauma, and resistance.

This section explores the artistic interpretations of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary themes through contemporary text-based visual art. By transforming his words into layered, fragmented, and immersive compositions, this approach recontextualizes historical narratives and engages audiences in active remembrance [30].

The meaning of the work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer lies in his deep concern for justice, history, and human dignity. Through his novels and essays, he gives voice to the voiceless those who are often left out of official history, such as peasants, women, and the oppressed. His famous *Buru Quartet* series, written while he was imprisoned without trial, offers a powerful retelling of Indonesia's colonial past, helping readers understand the roots of modern Indonesian identity. Pramoedya often used personal stories to show how colonialism and authoritarianism affect everyday lives, making his works both political and deeply human. His characters struggle with injustice, speak out against power, and search for truth, reflecting his belief that resistance is necessary and that writing itself is a form of struggle. He also saw language as a tool for shaping memory and national identity, which is why he chose to write in Bahasa Indonesia. In short, his work carries meaning not only through the stories he tells but also through the values he stands for: freedom, truth, and the importance of remembering.

Pramoedya's assertion that "One may be as smart as the sky, but if they do not write, they will disappear from society and history" highlights the importance of documenting knowledge. In response, visual artworks can depict fading or vanishing text, blurred calligraphy, or dissolving ink to symbolize silenced voices. By incorporating erasure techniques or ephemeral materials, these works reinforce the fragility of memory and the consequences of historical omission. The statement, "There is nothing more sacred for an educated person than working for humanity," reflects Pramoedya's belief in intellectual responsibility. This concept is visualized through layered text interacting with abstract forms of movement, evoking struggle and liberation. Overlapping images of historical protests or fragmented silhouettes can enhance the sense of tension, underscoring the ongoing fight against oppression. The phrase, "We have fought, Nyo. As best as we could, as honorably as possible," embodies resistance and resilience. This theme can be explored through distressed textures, layered archival imagery, and fragmented text, emphasizing the persistence of identity amidst colonial repression.

The use of worn surfaces, torn paper, or overpainted words mirrors the erasures and struggles endured by past generations.

Pramoedya's declaration, "An educated person must be fair from their thoughts, let alone in their actions," critiques intellectual suppression. Visual works can incorporate censored or fragmented text, symbolizing the erasure of truth. Methods such as redacted passages, burned edges, or palimpsest, layering convey the fragility of free expression and the act of reclaiming silenced narratives. The idea that "Life is very simple. It is only the interpretations that make it grand" aligns with the theme of time and reinterpretation. This concept is reflected in shifting, morphing, or overlaying text-based works that explore changing historical narratives. By employing dynamic, evolving materials, such as lenticular prints or layered transparencies, these pieces invite viewers to witness the transformation of meaning over time.

The Role of the Artist's Creative Process in Emotional and Intellectual Engagement

This section focuses on how the process of creating text-based art, such as choosing specific excerpts, deciding on media and format, or physically altering the text, shapes the viewer's emotional and mental response. The artist becomes a mediator between the text and the audience, selecting and transforming words to provoke empathy, critical thinking, or even discomfort. The creative process itself becomes part of the message, as the labor, layering, and sometimes destruction of words mirror themes of censorship, struggle, or recovery.

Manu Samasta, the cosmic human, is the idea of a human being as an inseparable part of the universe, not just as a physical form, but as a living soul that thinks, feels, and connects. It portrays the human as a cosmic being who struggles to preserve dignity amidst inequality, oppressive power, and spiritual emptiness. As Pramoedya Ananta Toer once said, "*A human being is born not to be defeated.*" This painting seeks to capture that spirit: the enduring will of the universal human who continues to resist, even in the face of darkness.

The painting is realized in abstract form with no representation of the human figure. The composition is built through layers of color and forms in constant motion: spirals to represent cycles of awareness, cracks to symbolize historical wounds, and faint light to suggest inner hope. Deep reds, blacks, dark blues, and muted yellows collide and blend, expressing conflict, awakening, and interconnection. In certain areas, fragments of Pramoedya's words may be subtly embedded into the painting: "*You can be as smart as you like, but if you don't write, you will be lost from society and from history.*" These texts are not only narrative devices but become visual elements that intensify the painting's energy field.

This painting invites viewers to feel human existence more deeply, not just as physical survival, but as a conscious journey. It speaks through abstract forms of the courage to be whole, to remain fully human. As Pramoedya reminds us, *"In life, all we really have is courage."* *Manu Samasta* is not just about existence, but about the strength to remain human in a world that often pushes us to forget our humanity. Through these artistic explorations, Pramoedya's words transcend literature, becoming a visual and immersive experience. The interplay of text, materiality, and abstraction not only honors his legacy but also challenges historical amnesia, ensuring that silenced voices continue to resonate in contemporary discourse. This section explores the artist's expressive process as a method of knowledge creation and emotional communication, referring to Expression Theory. It examines how inner experience, memory, empathy, anger, or hope influence the transformation of literary text into visual language. Through expressive gestures, brushstrokes, and symbolic choices, the artist translates Pramoedya's themes into a new form that invites emotional engagement and understanding. This subchapter discusses how the artwork does not simply illustrate literature but becomes a space where meaning is generated through subjective interpretation and shared feeling [31]. Artistic expression as a mode of knowing means that art is not only about beauty or emotion but also a way of understanding and questioning life and the world. In this sense, contemporary artist who engage with the words of Pramoedya Ananta Toer are using art to explore history, identity, and truth, just as Pramoedya did through literature.



Figure 10.Wayan Karja, 2025. *Manu Samasta*, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm.
(Original photograph taken by I Wayan Karja, 2025).

Contemporary artist who respond to his writings, whether through painting, installation, video, or performance, are continuing this spirit of remembering and witnessing. They are not just showing something; they are thinking through visual form, asking viewers to reflect on power, injustice, and identity. For example, using text from Pramoedya's novels in visual art can turn his political messages into new forms that speak to today's audience. Layering, erasure, repetition, or fragmentation of his words in an artwork can express how memory is formed, hidden, or reclaimed, especially in societies with a history of censorship or violence. Art becomes a space to question history, just as Pramoedya questioned colonial and authoritarian systems in his books. In short, artistic expression inspired by Pramoedya's words is a way of knowing the past, feeling the present, and imagining the future. It turns literature into a living dialogue, where visual art becomes a tool for critical thinking, cultural resistance, and human empathy.

Visual Art as a Strategy Against Historical Amnesia and Censorship

This part investigates how incorporating Pramoedya's texts into visual artworks can challenge collective forgetting and political silencing in postcolonial contexts. It looks at how visual art can make suppressed histories visible again, reclaim silenced voices, and question official narratives. Through public exhibitions, performances, and installations, artists can use Pramoedya's words to reopen conversations about the past and to resist the forces that once tried to erase them. Text-based visual art becomes a form of cultural memory work, reminding society of stories that still matter.

This explores the cultural and ethical values found in visual signs and symbols inspired by the writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, using visual semiotics as a way to understand how meaning is formed and communicated through art. In postcolonial contexts where censorship and historical erasure are common, visual art becomes a powerful tool to resist silence and reclaim forgotten or hidden narratives. Artists who work with fragments of Pramoedya's texts, such as distorted typography, erased words, or symbolic imagery, are not only expressing ideas but also making ethical choices. Their works function as signs of resistance, challenging viewers to confront the legacy of oppression, colonization, and authoritarian rule. By turning literature into visual language, these artists connect aesthetic decisions with deeper social and political concerns. The way text is arranged, altered, or presented carries emotional and historical weight, speaking to issues of memory, identity, and justice.

Visual art, in this sense, becomes more than just a way to express feelings, it becomes a way of knowing, remembering, and resisting. Through the lens of visual semiotics, we can see how each mark, word, or symbol in an artwork reflects a deeper struggle over truth and memory, much like Pramoedya's lifelong effort to give voice to the silenced and fight against forgetting. In art therapy, elements like voice and video add powerful

layers of interaction. These tools, along with the final painting outcome, strongly influence how effective the therapy is. Future studies should continue exploring multisensory experiences and support the step-by-step development of painting skills to help boost emotional engagement and improve therapeutic results [32] [33].

In the context of Visual Art as a Strategy Against Historical Amnesia and Censorship, it is important to question how effective this strategy truly is amid the dominance of official narratives and the growing culture of forgetting. Visual art indeed holds great potential to revive collective memory and challenge censorship, but it does not always succeed in breaking through rigid institutional and political boundaries. When artworks are displayed in formal spaces like galleries or museums, there is a risk that their messages of resistance may be consumed merely as aesthetic objects without disrupting the structures of power they intend to critique. In some cases, these works may even be neutralized or reabsorbed by the very systems they oppose. Therefore, if visual art genuinely aims to function as a strategy against historical amnesia and censorship, it must dare to move beyond the comfort zone of institutions and actively engage in the social field, presenting Pramoedya not merely as a symbol, but as a spark for critical awareness, especially for generations living in the uncertainty of history's direction.

Ultimately, the integration of Pramoedya's texts into visual art is not just an aesthetic gesture, but a political and ethical act that challenges the erasure of memory and the silencing of dissent. For such works to remain relevant and impactful, they must go beyond symbolic representation and actively engage with the public in ways that provoke dialogue, reflection, and resistance. In this sense, visual art becomes not only a site of memory, but a living strategy for truth-telling one that insists on remembering what power seeks to forget.

Conclusion

Text-based visual art powerfully reimagines Pramoedya's work by transforming his defiant literary voice into a multisensory experience that resists historical erasure and censorship. Through the creative use of fragmented text, symbolic imagery, and altered typography, artists do more than just visualize his words, they reactivate the urgency of his work within contemporary contexts marked by silencing and forgetting. The artistic process, what is revealed, hidden, layered, or emphasized, becomes a deliberate act of meaning-making that invites viewers to engage emotionally and intellectually with the past. By embedding Pramoedya's language into visual forms, artists reclaim suppressed histories, challenge dominant narratives, and awaken public memory. In this way, art becomes not only a vessel for remembrance but also a form of cultural resistance, preserving the spirit of dissent and critical awareness that Pramoedya embodied throughout his life. Thus, text-based visual art not only preserves Pramoedya's legacy but also ignites the fire of resistance that continuously rejects

forgetting and injustice. These works serve as a vital call for society not only to remember history but also to act for true justice and freedom. This art reminds us that voices once silenced can resound again with even greater power, awakening awareness and transforming the future.

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