

Revealing the Symbolic Meaning of Heri Dono's *Flying Angels*: From Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Flying Angels (1996) by Heri Dono is examined in this article as a visual installation rich in symbolic complexity and interpretive openness. This work is selected as the object of study to explore how Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework can be applied to reveal the layered meanings embedded in contemporary visual art. Employing a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics, the research positions the artwork as an autonomous visual discourse that generates meaning beyond the artist's original intention. The analysis focuses on visual, symbolic, and narrative elements, particularly the representation of angelic figures rendered grotesque, mechanical, and ironic. Through hermeneutic interpretation, these angels—traditionally associated with purity, transcendence, and moral authority—are understood as ambivalent symbols that articulate tensions between spirituality, technology, and social critique within modernity. The mechanical movements, hybrid materials, and vivid colours operate as a symbolic system reflecting the distortion of spiritual values under technological rationality and globalised cultural conditions. The findings demonstrate that *Flying Angels* functions not merely as an aesthetic installation, but as an open visual text that invites critical reflection on the erosion of spirituality, processes of dehumanisation, and the transformation of traditional values in the technological era. By emphasising Ricoeur's concepts of distanciation, surplus of meaning, and dialogical interpretation, this study contributes to Indonesian contemporary art discourse and underscores the relevance of hermeneutic approaches in expanding interpretive dialogue across cultural and temporal contexts.

KEYWORDS

Flying Angels
Hermeneutics
Heri Dono
Symbolism

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INTRODUCTION

Heri Dono is a contemporary Indonesian artist whose work consistently navigates the intersection of local visual traditions, socio-political critique, and experimentation with contemporary media. Since the 1990s, Heri Dono has become widely known for his installations, paintings, and kinetic objects that utilize traditional artistic idioms—such as wayang puppetry, batik ornaments, and mythological figures—as tools for criticizing power relations, modernity, and the social conditions of Indonesian society. In this context, *Flying Angels* (1996) holds a significant position because it clearly demonstrates Heri Dono's visual strategy of distorting spiritual and religious symbols to reveal the paradoxes of modern life.

Flying Angels is a large-scale installation featuring angelic figures in a floating position, complemented by mechanical elements, unconventional materials, and artificial lighting. The representation of angels—generally associated with holiness, spirituality, and morality—in this work appears grotesque, caricatured, and mechanical. This visual

distortion creates a tension between the image of angels as transcendent beings and their seemingly artificial and absurd forms. This tension makes Flying Angels not only an aesthetic object but also a visual text fraught with symbolic, ideological, and cultural issues.

To date, readings of Heri Dono's works have generally been conducted through approaches such as social criticism, identity politics, postcolonialism, or visual semiotics. These approaches have successfully uncovered the critical and ironic dimensions of his works, but often still position meaning as relatively stable and tied to a specific social context. In this context, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach is relevant, as it provides a conceptual framework that positions artworks as autonomous texts whose meanings are not singular but rather open, layered, and constantly generated through a process of interpretation.

Paul Ricoeur views texts—including visual texts—as discourses that distanciate from their authors and construct their own worlds of meaning. Through concepts such as distanciation, the hermeneutic circle, and the surplus of meaning, Ricoeur asserts that meaning does not stop at the creator's intention but continues to develop through the dialogue between the text and its reader. In the context of contemporary art, this perspective allows works like Flying Angels to be read not merely as representations of a specific social critique, but as symbolic fields that open up various interpretive possibilities related to spirituality, technology, power, and humanity.

Although Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics has been widely applied in the study of literature, religious texts, and the humanities, its application in the study of contemporary Indonesian art remains relatively limited and has not been explored in depth, particularly in installation works. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by positioning Flying Angels as a visual text analyzed through Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework. This approach is not intended to replace existing socio-political readings, but rather to complement them with an interpretive perspective that emphasizes the dynamics of meaning, the ambiguity of symbols, and the active involvement of the interpreter.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how the symbolic meanings in Flying Angels are formed, negotiated, and developed through the process of hermeneutic interpretation. The study focuses on how angelic figures, mechanical elements, colors, and shapes function as symbols that generate a surplus of meaning in the relationship between visual texts and cultural contexts. Thus, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of contemporary Indonesian art studies, while expanding the application of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the realm of visual art.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-interpretive approach with Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework as the primary methodological foundation. This approach is chosen because it allows the artwork to be treated as an autonomous visual text, open to interpretation, and not entirely determined by the creator's intentions. In this context, Heri Dono's Flying Angels is understood not merely as an aesthetic object, but as a visual discourse containing layers of symbolic meaning.

The primary object of the research is the installation Flying Angels (1996), which is analyzed as a visual text. The research data consists of the artwork's visual elements, including the angel figure, body shape and structure, mechanical elements, use of color, materials, scale, and the installation's presentation. These elements are not treated as standalone objective data, but rather as part of an interconnected structure of meaning within the overall visual text.

The analysis process is conducted through a dialogical hermeneutic interpretation process, combining two key moments, as formulated by Ricoeur: explanation and understanding. The explanation stage involves systematically identifying and describing the artwork's visual structure, including medium, composition, form, color, and mechanical aspects. This stage aims to map how the visual elements work to shape the work's visual discourse.

The next stage is comprehension, which is the process of symbolic interpretation of these visual elements, incorporating relevant cultural, social, and historical contexts. At this stage, the researcher does not seek to find a final or single meaning, but rather explores the possible meanings that emerge from the relationship between the visual text and the interpreter's horizon of understanding. This process follows the principle of the hermeneutic circle, where understanding of individual parts of the work is continually negotiated with an understanding of the work's overall meaning.

The concept of distanciation in Ricoeur's hermeneutics is used to maintain a critical distance between the interpreter and the work. With this distanciation, interpretation is not directed at reconstructing the artist's subjective intentions, but rather at examining the world of meaning presented by the visual text itself. Furthermore, the concept of surplus of meaning is used to explain how the symbols in Flying Angels generate meanings that go beyond their literal representation, opening up space for plural and contextual readings.

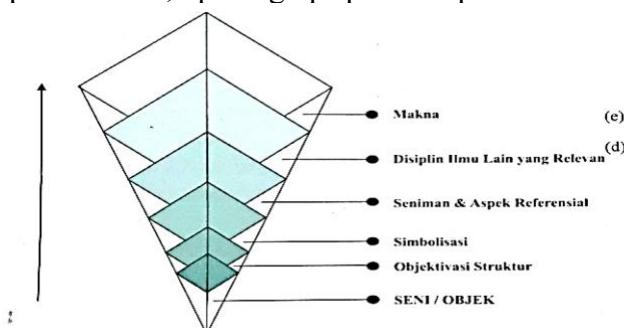


Figure 1. Hermeneutic Study Methodology (Source: Saidi, 2008)

To maintain consistency of interpretation, the analysis is conducted iteratively, moving between visual description, symbolic interpretation, and theoretical reflection. This approach allows for a non-reductive reading of the work, while simultaneously positioning the researcher as an interpretive subject aware of their position in the interpretive process. Thus, this research method functions not merely as a technical procedure, but as a reflective framework that affirms the openness of meaning in contemporary art.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Textual Description of Flying Angels as a Visual Text

As a visual text, Heri Dono's installation Flying Angels (1996) presents a complex and layered visual configuration. This work is realized in the form of a group of angelic figures suspended in the exhibition space, creating the impression of floating or flying. The use of bamboo, cloth, and fiberglass not only serves a technical function but also contributes to the work's hybrid visual character—simultaneously combining traditional, artificial, and mechanical elements.

The angelic figures in Flying Angels are presented in a grotesque and fantastical form, far from the representation of angels common in religious iconography. Unrealistic body proportions, eccentric facial expressions, and caricatured gestures make these angels appear

unique, imaginative, and yet problematic. Each figure is equipped with a mechanical-electronic circuit that enables movement and the emission of flickering lights. This visual effect creates the illusion of angels flying among the starlight, while simultaneously emphasizing the artificial and engineered nature of the visual experience presented.

As a dominant visual element, angels carry a strong symbolic weight. In many cultures, angels are understood as symbols of spiritual power, protection, and enlightenment (Abdullah 2018). However, in Flying Angels, angels function not solely as religious symbols, but as a medium for critique and reflection. In line with the views of Haris and Amalia (2018), these angels appear as fantastical creatures that open up space for critical ideas about spirituality, modernity, and social conditions.

The second significant visual element is motif and pattern. The angels' bodies are adorned with various motifs reminiscent of batik and wayang kulit (shadow puppet) decorations. The presence of these motifs connects the work to Indonesian visual traditions and emphasizes Heri Dono's strategy of combining local cultural elements with contemporary issues. These motifs can be interpreted as visual commentary on how traditions continue to interact, negotiate, and even be distorted by modern social, political, and technological changes.

The third visual element is color. Flying Angels features bright and contrasting colors such as red, blue, yellow, and green. These colors serve not only a decorative function but also imply the diversity of human experience and the complexity of social issues. The tension between the striking colors and the distorted angel figures can be read as a representation of the conflict between the spiritual and the physical world. The richly colored and patterned visual setting creates a dynamic context that reinforces the sense of clash between spiritual and mundane elements.

This visual analysis demonstrates that the elements in Flying Angels work both individually and collectively to construct both literal and connotative meanings (Meriska Yosiana 2022). Within Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, understanding the entire work is inextricably linked to the reciprocal relationship between the visual parts and their overall context. The hermeneutic circle operates as interpretation moves from visual details to the overall meaning, then back to the details to deepen understanding.

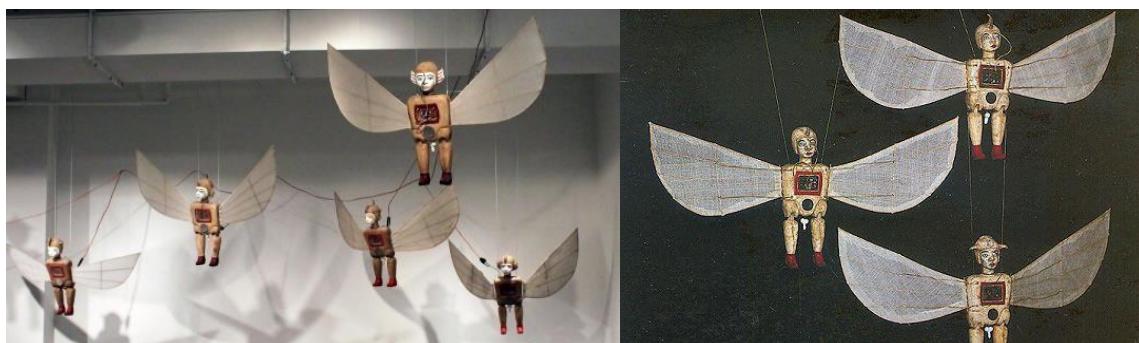


Figure 2. Heri Dono's work entitled Flying Angels in 1996
(Source: <https://archive.ivaa-online.org/artworks/detail/2692>)

2. The Meaning of the Text of Flying Angels

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach allows Flying Angels to be treated as a text rich in symbols. As one of Heri Dono's iconic works, Flying Angels demonstrates the artist's tendency to combine traditional cultural idioms with sharp social criticism. In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, symbols do not convey meaning directly but rather require an interpretive

process involving the interpreter's critical involvement (Sungkar 2023).

a. The Angel Element

The figure of the angel is a dominant symbol in this work. In popular culture and spiritual traditions, angels are understood as sacred beings and messengers of the divine (Rivan et al. 2023). However, Heri Dono presents angels in eccentric forms: resembling wayang golek (shadow puppets), with unusual proportions, odd expressions, and even being depicted naked. This distortion can be read as a symbol of the crisis of spirituality in modern society, where sacred values are degraded and losing their authority.

b. Mechanical Elements

Mechanical elements—propellers, bamboo frames, and flashing lights—are visual hallmarks that reinforce the work's symbolic critique. Within Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, these elements open up interpretations of the ambivalence of modern technology. Technology, which should support civilization, instead has the potential to distance humans from spiritual and moral values. The angel's dependence on machinery becomes a metaphor for modern humans who have lost their spiritual autonomy.

c. Color and Form Elements

The bright colors and caricatured forms create a surreal and humorous impression. This visual humor is not neutral, but rather functions as a strategy of irony. The distortion of form and the asymmetrical composition reinforce the interpretation of the distortion of spiritual values in the modern context.

d. Position and Movement

The angel's floating position and mechanical movements emphasize the paradox between spiritual imagery and artificial representation. The wings, resembling mechanical flying devices, demonstrate the changing relationship between humans and spirituality in the era of mechanization.

3. Flying Angels as a Symbolic Work

As a symbolic work, Flying Angels displays a visual strategy that consciously combines local Indonesian traditions with global social and cultural issues. The symbolism in this work is not singular or static, but rather operates as a fluid and ambivalent field of meaning. Angels, mechanical elements, colors, and wayang idioms form a network of symbols that interact and enrich the possibilities for interpretation.

The angel as a symbol undergoes a radical transformation in this work. In many religious traditions and popular culture, angels are positioned as sacred figures, guardians of morality, and messengers of the divine (Rivan et al. 2023). However, Heri Dono strips away these attributes of sanctity by depicting the angel as a grotesque, naked, and mechanical figure. This distortion cannot be read solely as a visual provocation, but rather as a symbolic strategy to demonstrate how spirituality in modern society is degraded, manipulated, and loses its ethical orientation. The angel in Flying Angels is no longer a guarantor of goodness, but rather a figure trapped within complex socio-political and technological structures.

The mechanical elements reinforce this symbolic dimension. The combination of a propeller, a bamboo frame, and a flashing light system suggests the angels' dependence on human-made technology. In this context, technology is not understood as a neutral tool, but rather as a symbol of the dominance of instrumental rationality. The mechanical angels can

be read as a metaphor for modern humans increasingly enmeshed in technological and bureaucratic systems, losing their spiritual freedom and moral autonomy. This symbol also critiques the illusion of progress that often accompanies narratives of modernity and globalization.

The influence of the wayang tradition and visual humor constitutes another significant symbolic layer. Wayang, in the context of Indonesian culture, functions as a medium for conveying moral values and social criticism (Sugita and Tilem Pastika 2022). In Flying Angels, the angels, resembling puppets, can be understood as representations of authority figures driven by external forces, losing their will and integrity. The humor and visual absurdity do not diminish the work's critical power, but rather serve as a means to convey the critique more subtly and reflectively.

Thus, the symbolism in Flying Angels does not operate linearly, but rather through overlapping meanings. Angels, machines, and traditional idioms form a visual allegory of the crisis of spirituality, dehumanization, and the manipulation of power in the context of modernity. This work places the viewer in a reflective position, where the symbols do not offer definitive answers but open up a space for critical contemplation.

4. Hermeneutic Interpretation and Textuality

Reading Flying Angels through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics firmly positions this work as a visual text possessing autonomy of meaning. Within Ricoeur's framework, texts—including visual texts—are no longer entirely bound by the author's intentions, but instead open up what is known as the world of the text, a world of possible meanings offered to the reader. Thus, Flying Angels is not understood solely as Heri Dono's personal expression, but as a structure of meaning that can engage in dialogue with various social, cultural, and historical contexts.

At the initial level, this work presents semantic or direct meaning. Visually, the viewer sees distorted, mechanical, and ironic angelic figures. At this level, the visual text operates through sensorially recognizable signs: the angels' caricatured bodies, mechanical wings, flickering lights, and the installation composition suspended in the space. This semantic meaning is important because it serves as the starting point for the interpretation process, but in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, this meaning is not final.

Symbolic meaning emerges when the viewer goes beyond the literal and begins to interpret the relationships between visual elements. Ricoeur emphasized that symbols always "say more" than they directly convey. In the context of Flying Angels, the mechanical angels not only represent corrupted or grotesque angels, but also open up interpretations of alienated modern humans, distorted spirituality, and the dominance of instrumental rationality. This is where the concept of surplus of meaning becomes key: the symbols of angels, machines, and light produce an excess of meaning that cannot be reduced to a single message.

This interpretive process occurs through what is known as the hermeneutic circle. The understanding of a part—for example, a mechanical element or a grotesque form—is continually negotiated with the understanding of the work as a symbolic installation. Each rereading of a visual detail has the potential to alter the understanding of the work's overall meaning, and vice versa. This circle does not aim to achieve a final meaning, but rather to deepen understanding through a reflective back and forth.

The concept of distanciation in Ricoeur's hermeneutics also plays a crucial role in this reading. Distanciation allows the interpreter to maintain a critical distance from both the artist's intentions and the context in which the work was created. With this distance, Flying Angels can be read as a stand-alone text that is relevant across time. This distanciation also

prevents overly reductive readings, such as confining the work to a political critique of a particular period.

Furthermore, the textuality of Flying Angels is dialogical. As a visual text, the work does not convey meaning monologously, but invites the active participation of the viewer. Meaning does not exist prior to the process of interpretation, but rather emerges through the interaction between the work's visual structure and the audience's horizon of understanding. In this sense, Flying Angels can be understood as an open text that continuously produces new meanings as the social and cultural context changes.

Thus, the application of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to Flying Angels demonstrates that the work's primary strength lies in its ability to maintain ambiguity and openness of meaning. The work's textuality is not directed at conveying a final message, but rather at creating a space for critical reflection. This space allows Heri Dono's work to remain relevant and productive as a field of interpretation in contemporary art discourse.

5. Cultural, Social, and Global Contextualization

The interpretation of Flying Angels cannot be separated from its surrounding cultural, social, and historical context. Ricoeur emphasized that understanding a text always occurs within a specific horizon, where the interpreter's experience and knowledge interact with the text's structure of meaning.

In the context of traditional Indonesian culture, the influence of wayang (puppetry) is crucial. Wayang is not merely a performing art, but also a medium for moral reflection and social criticism. The puppet-like form of the angels suggests wayang's function as a satirical tool against power. These angels can be read as authority figures who have lost their spiritual values and act as puppets of the system.

Socio-politically, Flying Angels emerged in the context of Indonesia experiencing tension between modernization, control of power, and a crisis of public trust. Heri Dono is known as an artist critical of bureaucracy and authoritarianism. The mechanical angels in this work can be understood as an allegory for political elites and bureaucrats who have lost their morality, moving mechanically according to the logic of power.

In a global context, this work also reflects the impact of globalization and technology. The transformation of angels into mechanical creatures reflects an anxiety about dehumanization in the technological era. Spiritual and humanitarian values are threatened with being replaced by efficiency, productivity, and technological control. Thus, Flying Angels speaks not only of Indonesia but also of the universal condition of modern humanity.

6. Dialogue and Interaction with the Audience

Within Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, the meaning of an artwork is never present in a closed or final form, but rather is realized through a process of dialogue between the text and the audience. Dialogue here is not understood as direct verbal communication, but as an interpretive relationship that allows for an exchange of meaning between the structure of the visual text and the audience's horizon of understanding. Flying Angels functions as an open visual text that actively invites the audience's involvement in the process of meaning-making.

This dialogue begins with sensory and affective experiences. The bright colors, the mechanical movements of the angels, the flickering lights, and the sheer scale of the installation hanging in the exhibition space create an immersive visual experience. This experience triggers an initial emotional response—interest, surprise, and even anxiety—which, in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, is understood as a gateway to a more reflective

understanding. In other words, affect is not separated from cognition but rather becomes an integral part of the interpretive process.

In the next stage, the dialogue develops into a reflection on meaning. Audiences began to question the incongruity between the culturally familiar image of the angel and the mechanical and grotesque representations presented by the work. This tension prompted audiences to renegotiate their understanding of spirituality, technology, and humanity. In this context, the work does not impose a particular interpretation, but rather provides ambivalent symbols that demand active engagement.

The mechanical angel symbol serves as a medium for dialogue between the spiritual and social realms. For some audiences, this symbol opens up reflections on the crisis of spirituality in the modern era; for others, it becomes an allegory for power, bureaucracy, and dehumanization. This diversity of interpretations emphasizes the work's dialogical nature: meaning is not entirely contained within the text, but neither is it entirely determined by the audience. Meaning emerges between the two.

From Ricoeur's perspective, this dialogue is also temporal. Each reading occurs within a specific historical context, so *Flying Angels* can generate different meanings at different times and in different situations. The work, for example, can be read as political criticism in one period, and as spiritual reflection or technological criticism in another. This dialogic nature ensures that the work remains relevant and productive as a field of interpretation.

Furthermore, the dialogue in *Flying Angels* is also collective. This work not only stimulates individual reflection but also opens up a space for social discourse. Through discussion, debate, and the exchange of views in the public sphere, the work's meaning is continuously negotiated and renewed. Thus, audience interaction not only complements the work but also becomes part of the continuity of its meaning.

By positioning the audience as an active interpretive subject, *Flying Angels* affirms art's position as a space for critical dialogue. Within Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, this dialogic approach allows artworks to transcend their representational function and serve as a medium for ethical, social, and spiritual reflection on modern life.

7. Audience Responses and Interpretations

As a direct continuation of the work's dialogic nature, audience responses and interpretations to *Flying Angels* must be understood as an integral part of the hermeneutic process, not as external additions after the work's meaning has been established. In Paul Ricoeur's perspective, the meaning of a text is never fully present before it is read, but rather actualized through the audience's engagement in a specific time and space. Therefore, the diverse audience responses emphasize the openness and productivity of the work's meaning.

Initially, audience responses are often visual and affective. The bright colors, grotesque forms of the angels, and unusual mechanical movements trigger a range of emotional reactions, ranging from fascination and amusement to anxiety and discomfort. These affective responses are inseparable from the process of meaning-making, as they serve as entry points for deeper reflection. The tension between expectations of angels as sacred figures and ironic mechanical representations encourages audiences to question established cultural and spiritual assumptions.

In the reflective stage, audience interpretations begin to develop according to their individual horizons of understanding. Audiences with a spiritual or religious background tend to interpret *Flying Angels* as a critique of the degradation of spirituality and the replacement of transcendental values by technology and materialism. Conversely, audiences with socio-political sensibilities see the mechanical angels as an allegory of power,

bureaucracy, and authority that have lost their moral integrity, moving mechanically without ethical reflection.

This difference in interpretation does not indicate a directionless relativism of meaning, but rather demonstrates how visual texts operate dialogically. The work's meaning is not entirely determined by its visual structure, but neither is it entirely dependent on the audience's subjectivity. Meaning emerges in the space between the two, through a continuous negotiation between the work's symbols and the audience's experience.

Furthermore, audience responses to Flying Angels often transcend individual experience and develop into collective discourse. This work sparks discussion about issues of dehumanization, spiritual crisis, technological dominance, and moral corruption in social and political contexts. Within this discursive space, Flying Angels serves as a medium for shared reflection, enabling the exchange of views and rereading.

Thus, the alignment between the work's dialogue and audience response confirms that Flying Angels is not simply an aesthetic object, but rather a living visual text. Audience response is part of the work's ongoing meaning, ensuring that the symbols presented are continually interpreted, debated, and reinterpreted. Within Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, this dynamic positions Flying Angels as a relevant field of critical reflection for reading contemporary art.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that Heri Dono's Flying Angels (1996) can be more deeply understood when treated as a visual text through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical framework. This approach allows installation artworks to be read not merely as aesthetic representations or direct social critiques, but as autonomous, open-ended symbolic discourses that continuously produce meaning through the process of interpretation. Thus, the work's meaning is not reduced to the artist's intentions or a specific historical context, but rather as the result of a dialogue between the work's visual structure and the interpreter's horizon of understanding.

Through the stages of explanation and understanding, this analysis reveals that the angel figure, mechanical elements, color, and installation strategies in Flying Angels operate as an intertwined system of symbols. The angel is no longer a stable symbol of purity, but rather an ambivalent figure that signifies the tension between spirituality and technological rationality. The bodily distortion, the use of mechanical devices, and the caricature aesthetic open up space for reflection on the condition of modern humans, increasingly trapped in mechanization, instrumental rationality, and a crisis of meaning.

The application of the concepts of distanciation and surplus of meaning in Ricoeur's hermeneutics confirms that Flying Angels does not offer a single moral message or didactic critique. Instead, the work presents a complex and paradoxical network of meanings, where spiritual symbols are reproduced in ironic, humorous, and problematic forms. This openness of meaning allows the work to remain relevant and reinterpreted in different social, cultural, and historical contexts.

From the perspective of contemporary Indonesian art studies, this study demonstrates that Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach can be a productive methodological alternative for reading installations rich in symbolism and cultural hybridity. This approach complements existing socio-political or semiotic readings by emphasizing the dynamics of meaning, the ambiguity of symbols, and the active role of the interpreter. Thus, this research contributes not only to the reinterpretation of Flying Angels but also to the expansion of methodological discourse in the study of art and visual culture.

In conclusion, this study confirms that Flying Angels can be understood as a visual text that is constantly alive, moving, and open to interpretation. Within Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, this openness is the work's primary strength, simultaneously positioning it as a medium for critical reflection on spirituality, technology, and humanity within the context of modernity. These findings are expected to serve as a foundation for further research developing a hermeneutic approach to contemporary art, both in Indonesia and globally.

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