



# IR-UI COMMENTARIES

---

*IR-UI Commentaries is a platform for academics of the Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia (IR-UI) to share their thought on issues related to the study of international relations. The ideas are presented from the perspective of International Security, International Political-Economy, Transnational Society, or the multidimensional approaches across the three clusters. It is jointly published by the IR-UI and Centre for International Relations Studies (CIReS) - Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Indonesia. Analysis presented here represent the views of the author(s) and not the institutions they are affiliated with, the IR-UI and CIReS-UI.*

---

vol. I / no. 03 | July 2020

## Nothing is Written in Stone: Redefining the Perception of Human Security through Arts

Authors: Annisa D. Amalia<sup>1</sup>, Evi Fitriani<sup>2</sup>, Sally Texania<sup>3</sup>

### Summary<sup>4</sup>

As the international society continue to witness varying forms of threats to humanity, the concept of 'human security' as introduced by the state has constantly been challenged for its inadequacy to capture and address the realities of human insecurity. The silver lining of this situation, however, relies on how those mainstream ideas of human securities are continuously contested and redefined through the medium of art. Through the use of alternative public and transnational space, art represents sincere aspirations of the people and facilitate them to realize their vision of their own – and others' – (in)securities, beyond the imaginary, yet powerful, wall of sovereignty which serve the national and rational interests of the powerful actors.

**Keywords:** *arts, human security, relational aesthetics, representations of (in)security*

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Visual Arts Independent Curator

<sup>4</sup> This edition is in particular the output of 'DefiningNurani: a Dialogue Series on Human Security' held by the IR-UI as part of its 35th Anniversary celebrations, and fully supported by its Alumnae Association (ILUNI HI-UI), series 1/03, titled: "Representasi Human Security dalam Seni Kontemporer", with Sally Texania (Speaker), Evi Fitriani, PhD (Discussant), and Shofwan Al Banna C, PhD (Host). [http://tiny.cc/ir-ui\\_definingnurani03](http://tiny.cc/ir-ui_definingnurani03)

## **‘Security Perceived by Whom?’: Art and Human Security Entangled**

The concept of human security, as it is commonly understood, is very much related to the purpose of achieving human freedom from fears and wants. Its strategy includes ‘deepening’ (extending referent object to human beings) and ‘widening’ (extending types of threats beyond military). Hence, four main characteristics of human security are defined as: people-centred, multidimensional, interconnected, and universal. This characterization appeals to many since sense of security can be very personal, contextual, and malleable depending on the changing socio-political norms and dynamics. Insecurities also often deal with emotions or feelings, meaning that physical violence is not the only sign or source of threat. Thus, the traditional definition of security entices questions, such as “security perceived by whom?”, “whose interests are served?”, and “how to achieve security built on the lived experiences of insecurity?”.

Although we are unconsciously forced to conform to the state-influenced security language, this does not mean other narratives are absent. The ideas of human security are also consistently reinterpreted and redefined through various channels, including arts. Arts has served as an equally powerful tool to assist in channelling human’s voices to express their emotions and aspirations. While the state-driven security approach has mainly been criticized for its practice of ‘silencing’ human’s voices, art emerges as a means to speak up in ‘silence’. It utilizes the character of ‘relational aesthetics’ in which an inclusive communication between artists and their represented image is developed—enabling the human empowerment strategy of [‘security from below’](#). With the power of representing human feelings and experiences, art manifests as the most honest expression of human insecurity – arguably, far from any rational calculation of interest, cost and benefit. Therefore, lived experiences of insecurities are more genuinely represented to challenge the prevailing definition of human security and its policy implications.

## **Images of Human Sufferings: How Artworks Symbolize Insecurities**

Artworks have long been used as a medium to represent the image of human insecurities. The representation varies across time and place. In Europe, the tragedy of World War I and II was represented by [bloody images of dead bodies](#) – depicting the situation where the barbarity of power struggle between empires and states sacrificed the lives of innocent people. In Indonesia, the tragedy of colonial period as painted in [Penangkapan Diponegoro \(1857\)](#) by Raden Saleh, and the early period of independence in [Mengungsi \(1947\)](#) by Henk Ngantung, were recorded through paintings – reminding us of the history of the nation’s sufferings and struggle for freedom. Kehinde Wiley’s paintings explore themes of race, identity and power; his powerful [Ship of Fools \(2017\)](#) particularly confronts contemporary issues of migration and cultural identities. The visual elements – for instance colours and shapes – of these artworks are further utilized to leave a strong effect on audiences’ emotions. Picasso’s most famous anti-war work [Guernica \(1937\)](#), for instance, amplify the distressing atmosphere of the depiction of mutilated

bodies and sign the [declining civilization](#) during the Spanish civil war through a monochromatic cubism painting

As [security threats diversify](#) over time, so do their representations through art. We can observe how artworks manifest as political discourses. Ai Weiwei's sculptures, [Law of the Journey \(2017\)](#), represent the plight of 'boat people' during mass exodus to Europe and Australia. His artworks further serve as critiques towards governments' 'turn back the boats' policy in the context of 'asylum panic'. While the migration theme gains prominence in recent decades, Indonesian artists also carry political messages in their works, mostly representing the problems of poverty and inequality. This ephemeral nature of 'human security' is thus reflected through these shifting images. The representation of human insecurities through these works mostly symbolize bodily images of human desperation, personal sufferings, emotional distress or feeling of loss and loneliness – distinct from those during colonial and war period which mostly represent collective/national grief.

Since different representation of insecurity emphasize different personal emotions, security can naturally be sensed also very differently from one agency to another, and over time. This is exemplified through [Ai Weiwei's exhibition portraying the humanitarian crisis of refugees](#). On one hand, the art piece speaks to the crisis as a critique to government, but on the other hand it also depicts how refugees are perceived as security threats. Here, security is represented as neither absolute nor universal – what is perceived as threat for one community might be interpreted differently by others. Another example is how [monuments/statues](#) become a source of pride for one nation but also a legacy of colonial oppression for others. This shows how art criticizes the oversimplification of the conception of human (in)securities represented in mainstream narratives imposed by the dominant, while at the same time allows the continuous process of reinterpretation and redefinition of it, that is honest and true according to the appropriateness of norms and values in different time and place.

## **Defying Dominant Representations of Human Security**

The process of redefining human (in)security further implies that art possess the power to voice out the other 'silenced' interpretations and meanings of (in)security. It does not only personify the abstraction of human (in)security, but also helps to defy dominant interpretations/meanings of it by highlighting the much more complex and complicated realities behind it.

The dominant interpretations are also conveyed through art pieces, for instance, the display of statues in public which was intended [to record a particular occurrence in history](#). In many countries, including Indonesia, these statues of historical figures – national heroes – symbolize the nation's collective memory and identity. To challenge this historical narrative, recently, in the wake of anti-racism movement across countries, there have been cases where activists call for removal of monuments – such as the statue of [Cecil Rhodes in Oxford](#) – believed to promote white supremacy. This shows how art has empowered the powerless, providing medium for a

collective movement to happen, not only to correct a particular interpretation of history, but mainly to challenge the power and authority symbolized by those statues – which is believed to be no longer relevant for the contemporary context due to the advanced protection of racial equality and human rights. The attempt to defy the ruling government, however, is not only expressed through open protest and street-movement. In Indonesia, for example, to protest the stagnancy of conservative art supported by the New Order administration, young artists spoke their aspiration through a movement known as "Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru" (the Indonesia New Art Movement) which demand a pluralistic form of expression and to foster a more critical (political) art practice. They spoke through their artworks expressing their disappointments aiming to reinterpret the notion of 'rakyat' (people) to contest repressive practices of censorship and even abduction of critics by authorities.

The artists' expression of challenging the dominant images of security are generally channelled through two different spaces: (1) alternative public spaces, and (2) transnational space. Through the alternative public spaces, ideas of human security are continuously contested and reinterpreted. Meanwhile in transnational spaces, the growing interest on relational aesthetic and the development of the New Museology paradigm has enabled art practice to function as a platform to engage and empower audiences democratically. This approach allows artists, including grassroot artists, and their audiences to get involved in dialogues to reinterpret and remake representations of ideas through artworks, rendering artworks as a medium for people – including those who experience insecurities – to express and speak for themselves. This is a dialectic process, whereby social and political dynamics, including the interpretation of the narratives of human security, shape and are reshaped through artworks

In addition, the transnational space of art allows the representations of human insecurity to epitomize the reality that they cannot be confined to national borders. Ai Weiwei, an artist and activist, utilizes his transnational networks to represent security issues in China while living in exile due to his critical stance toward the government of the People's Republic of China. Meanwhile, other forms of visual arts, such as movies, also utilize the transnational space to shape audience's emotions, reconstruct our knowledge, and redefine the truth. The movie *Ship of Fools* (1965) and other Hollywood films portraying stories of wars and invasion, for instance, strongly depicts brutalities of rulers and mobilizes global audience to criticize and contest those political encounters.

## **Reinterpreting Insecurities, Imagining the Future?**

Previous parts have revealed that art demonstrates how the ideas of human security are not static, absolute, nor universal – nothing is written in stone. They are subjects to transformation depending on the changes in socio-political environments, the appropriateness of values and norms through time and space, and the relativity of human's personal experiences and emotions. Thus, the oversimplification of meaning – as it is presented by the powerful – is indeed problematic. Relevantly, this discussion has revealed how representations of 'human security' are continuously contested and reproduced through varying forms of contemporary

arts. It serves as an honest human expression that put a challenge to dominant representations reproduced by ruling agency.

Beyond the aesthetic expression, arts are about artist' articulation of solidarity with those who are marginalised and living in insecurity. Critical arts, in particular, play a significant emancipatory role in voicing out the experiences of those who were voiceless and powerless, across times and spaces. By utilizing various shapes in diverse alternative public space across borders, arts dialectically channel and express people' sincere heterogeneous interpretations of and aspirations for human security. However, what is more important is that art has provided us with a medium to convey our collective vision for a utopian future: a future guaranteeing a true security for all.\*\*\*

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dwi Ardhanariswari, Ph.D. (riris.sundrijo@ui.ac.id)

**Editorial Board**

Ali A. Wibisono, Ph.D. ▪ Asra Virgianita, Ph.D. ▪ Broto Wardoyo, Ph.D.

**Managing Editor**

Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia, Ph.D.

**Editorial Secretary**

Annisa Dina Amalia, MIR

**Staff**

Arivia Tri Dara Yuliestiana, M.Si ▪ Ivan Sanjaya ▪ Ayuni Yustika



Department of International Relations

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Indonesia

☎ (+62 21)-7873-744 ✉ internationalrelations@ui.ac.id

🌐 www.ir.fisip.ui.ac.id

📷 @internationalrelationsui

🐦 @ir\_fisipui

