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CROSSING LINES

STEPHAN SPICHER AND MADE WIAN TA

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When Lines Representing Identity Converge in a Dialogue between East and West

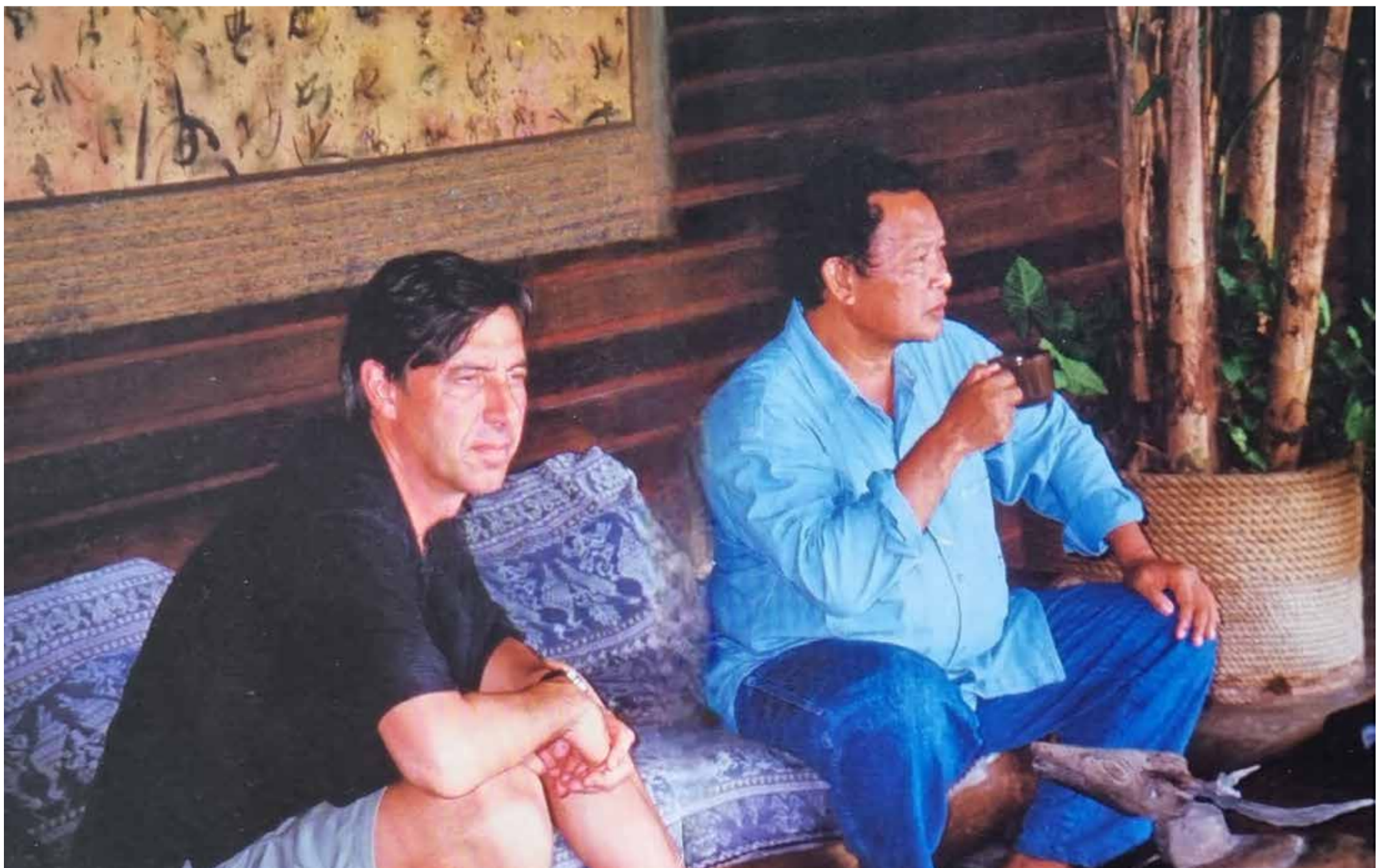
By Yudha Bantono

There is no escaping the 'line', a basic element of art, functioning as it does as a 'raw material' for most artists when creating their works. From bold brushstrokes to subtle pencil curves, lines play an important role in conveying an artist's ideas.

The Crossing Lines project represents the 25-year meeting of ideas of Stephan Spicher and Made Wianta. Conceived as a joint art project in Basel and Bali with the participation of the UNESCO and the Museum der kulturen Basel, the project explores line in the context of a dialogue between East and West.

Has the journey of the project - spanning decades - contributed any important ideas to enriching the East-West intercultural dialogue, and has it influenced the two artists? These are questions raised today, which the present exhibition aims to answer, following Made Wianta's passing three years ago.

Let's begin by exploring the attitudes of the two artists. First, Spicher: Bali holds a special place in his heart. Indeed, he often refers to Bali as his 'second home'. It is not only the nature and cultural traditions of Bali that fascinate him, but also the island's communal way of life, maintained largely unchanged to this day. As for Wianta, he had previously resided in the West from 1975 to 1977, specifically in the city of Brussels, where he yearned to delve deeper into Western culture. This laid the foundation for a series of trips to the West, in particular as part exchange programmes. Thus when he went to Basel and Rancate (in Ticino, in the Italian part of Switzerland), as part of Urs Ramseyer's planned exchange program, he was largely attracted due to his unsatisfied cultural curiosity. Basel and Ticino were to him part of an endeavor to escape the claustrophobia he felt while in Bali. The collaboration between Spicher and Wianta came to fruition after they connected on a personal level and quickly forged what went on to become a lasting friendship.



Stephan and Made Wianta at Studio Wianta in Apuan-Bali, 1997.

Wianta and Spicher's exchange program was initiated by Bali ethnologist and long-time curator at the Museum der Kulturen Basel Urs Ramseyer. The idea was for Balinese artists to visit Basel and vice versa for Basel artists to visit Bali. Urs considered art to be a potent tool for cultural dialogue. He believed that in our increasingly complex world, art should be a means to create beauty while fostering peace and harmony. In other words, he saw art exchanges as a way to tackle the hatred, violence and other woes that so often threaten to lead humanity to the brink of destruction. Initially, he had not considered bringing Spicher and Wianta together in a long-term art project. Their collaboration only came to fruition after the two connected on a personal level and forged what became a lasting friendship. This was when Urs Ramseyer then set up for them the Crossing Line exchange programme, which began in 1997 and continues to this day, albeit in a new form.

The concept of a cultural 'fulcrum' originating in the West is a recurring theme in art historiography. This belief affects the evaluation of eastern cultures, where Western concepts, methods and trends tend to dominate and thus skew interpretations of eastern culture. However, more recently there have emerged various reactions against the imbalance created by this prevailing notion. More inquisitive western artists are now applying eastern approaches to their art, and a cultural dialogue then ensues. It was such a level of personal intercultural dialogue that Spicher and Wianta addressed in their initial 2001 Crossing Lines exhibition, in which they challenged the misrepresentations that plagued the stereotypes of both eastern and western cultures.

What about history? Understanding the developments that took place from traditional art to modern and then contemporary implies an historical approach that inevitably takes into account the political and cultural dynamics of the day. Balinese fine art was influenced by the West even before the onslaught of modern art. Colonisation and its concomitant agendas re-engineered 'traditional' art even before schooling had a deep impact. A prominent role was played by 'enlightened' colonial circles – in particular that of two 'gurus': Spies and Bonnet, who transmitted elements of western knowledge to Balinese village artists. This process of 're-traditionalisation', which began in the 1920s and 1930s, continued after independence (1945) and on into the early development of tourism. It is only later, with the development of education, that western influences took a 'modernist' form, and it is this that shaped Made Wianta.



Eternal Line, 2004, 150 cm x 125 cm
Lacquer on Canvas

When Urs Ramseyer set up Crossing Lines as a means to fuel cultural communication, one of his aims was to expose, through art, the way 'eastern' people construe the impact and presence of the West – and westerners construe themselves as well, and symmetrically the way 'Western' people construed the presence of the East among themselves. It was an ambitious program. I was fortunate enough to be able to follow the development of the two artists involved in this project for twenty-five years, during which time I acted as assistant to both artists and also as curatorial assistant to Urs Ramseyer.

Now, let's delve into the backgrounds of the two artists. Wianta began his artistic journey as a fine art student in Yogyakarta. There he studied the evolution of formal artistic representation in the way that it was taught at art school, that is, formally, without gaining access to any cultural dynamics inherent to it. Lacking this understanding, and in order to better comprehend the dynamics involved, he took a job in Brussels (1975-1977), where he discovered his first creative cultural intersection, and this altered for good his artistic practices and world view. His feeling toward the West he experienced there is best expressed in a series of poems he wrote later during his later stay in Switzerland during Urs Ramseyer's program.

How did Wianta respond to his transformative experience in Brussels upon returning to Bali? Well, he fully focused on classical elements of his Balinese artistic culture, but in a totally innovative way. Symbols, icons, visual memories from his childhood that he could not let go of, memories of what in Bali are known as 'sekala' (the seen) and 'niskala' (the unseen), resurfaced in novel ways, together with ideas, perspectives and techniques heretofore unknown to him. This was when his famous Karangasem period was born. The works he made took a surrealistic turn. Mostly drawings, they feature images of beings the like of which had not yet taken form.

Wianta's creative dynamics, the West's main contribution to his art, was now launched for good and did not stop right up until his death in 2020. His creativity then unravelled, from one style to the other, one idea leading to the next. This led to the development of the various other 'periods' that characterise his work, centered around dots in informal constructions, then geometrical triangles, quadrangles, calligraphy, assembling, mixed media, calendars, and installation art and happening art.

Tracing Wianta's works during this now well-documented 'periodisation', it is clear that his 'western' experience influenced him deeply. However, although the influence enriched him, it did not significantly change his way of thinking as a Balinese. Wianta continued to apply Balinese thinking in order to question, and then to answer, the issues of the day, and each time there was a new surge of creativity. For example, he was quite aware upon returning from Belgium in the early 1980s that Bali's tourism was on a wrong track. Bali was becoming a tool of international capital. So how did he respond to this? Through installations and happenings that denounced the changes that he saw taking place. For example, he did not hesitate to bring onto the stage of the Bali Arts Center an open mini van full of Balinese people carrying offerings, holy water in plastic bottles and the like: Balinese culture was not simply displayed for show, but was at the same time besmirched. This represented an unprecedented visual criticism in Bali. In later works he continuously explored the environmental, political, social, cultural and humanitarian changes generated by the onslaught of capital on his beloved island. Once again I feel extremely fortunate to have been part of all his projects.

As an artist educated at the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts (Now the Jogjakarta Indonesian Art Institute), Wianta's way of thinking was deeply influenced by western techniques and theories.

This influence took another form following his experiences abroad, first in Brussels, and later in Switzerland. But all along, the more he was influenced by the West, the more, in the evolution of his artistic identity, he avoided the trap of the 'western frame'. He became instead a 'universal' artist, and never considered the west as his artistic reference. On the contrary, he discovered that his center was himself, and the west was no more than an encounter with his other self, which he went on to explore in detail.



Stephan Spicher

Similar to Wianta, Spicher embarks on his own artistic journey with fundamental existential questions. He evolved along a similar path, but originating in Europe. He received his academic education from the Art School of Basel, followed by individual tuition from the Italian painter Beppe Assenza. Spicher's understanding of fine art is deeply influenced by academic conceptualisation, which largely determined the type of aesthetics that he continues to explore today. However, I would argue that Spicher truly found his feet when he came into contact with the contemplative East, which was a long adventure indeed. His artistic journey took him first to Japan, then to an artist exchange program with a studio in Bali with the support of the Christoph Meriam Foundation, then to Russia, and later back to Indonesia and Japan which have become the touchstones of his ongoing art projects.

Spicher, of course, with his idiosyncratic, ethnologist-like understanding of culture, pursues until today a search for the 'essence' of things that owes much to his journeys in the east. In this respect his experience of the East is quite different from that of most western artists who have lived in Bali, who have tended to focus on the beauty of Bali's outward aspects - its nature, the charm of Balinese dancers, and the life of its people. For Spicher, Bali is the unseen, the essence, to which he strives to give form. Nature is but a veneer - albeit a beautiful one. Spicher's lines thus neither explain nor narrate the eastern elements to which he has been exposed. Rather they aim at the universal, at meeting the spirit of eastern culture head on in order to describe phenomena that are basic and fundamental to it - mostly natural phenomena. Spicher thus 'feels' and endeavors to represent root systems rather than real roots. These systems are shown either protruding or embedded, moving in the wind, tree trunks with their arching branches, seeds sprouting, and flowers blooming, wilting and falling to the ground. From wilderness to landscaped gardens and even rice fields, Spicher brings into focus the more essential features of the ongoing cycle of life.

Throughout his exploration of line, Spicher positions himself as a soul wandering without limits, exploring a life which is similarly without limits, not so much as part of some mellifluous choreography, but as a more deliberate 'tuning in' to the ever-present forces of nature that embrace him and cajole him into a conversation about life's depths.

Spicher and Wianta thus 'encountered' one another in their common escape from misrepresentation. While Spicher's experience in Bali did not have him wallowing in the 'paradise' cliché sought by most western artists, Wianta had to escape from the same Balinese cliché which people constantly tried impose on him.

I initially thought that in early meetings between these two artists they would complement each other both conceptually and technically, but in fact they followed rather separate paths. However, they certainly found common ground in building a space for 'dialogue' as western and eastern artists hailing from different cultures. Respect was also a meeting point, in which both seemed not so much to seek answers to problems, but rather to pose questions, and to do so, again, in their own ways. Both also succeeded in exploring changes in their respective artistic directions, without hesitation, continuing to do so at every meeting and thereby enriching each other's work at intervals.



Black on Black II, 2000, 238 cm x 425 cm. 5 panels,
Oil on Canvas

Like Wianta, Spicher begins with questions that are elemental and existential, and therefore universal. He sets off and focuses primarily on basic processes and a questioning of that which he sees in order to better understand it. At the heart of his perennial quest, and within the works presented in this exhibition, are questions about the flexibility and variability of light and the colours that emerge from the interplay between light and dark. Other fundamental questions arise from a reduction of the painting to the lines that demarcate surface and space on the one hand, and natural elements on the other, by revealing the depth of meaning in, for example, plants or plant elements.

Spicher demonstrates a profound sensitivity as an artist, delving into the depths of space - skillfully manipulating it and re-composing it with the utmost inner concentration. His lines depict the vitality and the flow of life, following the life force of growth and natural flow.

The abstraction in Spicher's latest work seems to be closely related to nature, and questions about nature play an important part. His work speaks of the nature of lines and objects, from seeds to leaves, and from tendrils to branches. Indeed, it is a form abstraction highly reminiscent of concrete elements.

While both Wianta and Spicher work on the essentialisation of line, Wianta's lines are generally accompanied by colour. One is an Easterner going 'Westward' with color. The other is a Westerner going Eastward, essentialising forms of nature, but without colour. Both strive to distance themselves from their own cultural background, continuously questioning the limits and relevance of their respective cultural heritage. Embracing the culture of the 'other', they strive to emancipate themselves from their inherited aesthetics, which always come back to haunt them in new and hidden ways. They belong to different traditions - one is a European, the other an Indonesian.

But both strive to dismantle the barriers of their respective traditions. And this is where they meet - in the essentialisation of line.

When an artist from a non-European tradition comes into contact with a European tradition, it is relatively easy for the non-European artist to embrace this tradition without questioning it. This was the case with Wianta, who re-essentialised what he found in Europe, using line and colour in new ways, at times chaotically and otherwise systematically. Unsurprisingly, a certain western heritage is obvious in Wianta's art.

Spicher can likewise be said to have 'inherited' aspects of eastern culture. This is found more obviously in his works dealing with natural elements, inspired by Bali, and through Bali and its nature. Removing oneself from western culture to 'go eastern' - Indonesian - is more difficult than the opposite. It was easier for Wianta to 'go Western', because the higher education that he had obtained was western based, reinforced by the plethora of sources circulating in academia and elsewhere, all around the world. Access to information about the east, on the other hand, was not as readily available to Spicher, who instead turned to culture and nature in a more indirect, intellectually driven way.

In Balinese tradition lines tend to be short and descriptive, contour-based, because they are mainly used to represent the traditional iconographic patterns used to represent the face and the body (nose, ears, eyebrows, eyes, lips, mouth, bodily gestures) in classical, narrative paintings. Meanwhile, line in the west has been treated in different ways throughout history, and Wianta studied all of these historical forms to better free himself from the constraints of the traditional line. When he met Spicher he discovered yet another, still freer application of the notion of 'wild lines'. Because for Spicher, line in the west is multi-functional: it can be descriptive of both the unseen and as well of visible natural elements.

The Bali Basel program has since its inception been regarded by its initiator as a cultural forum in which encounters between cultures are being explored at a deep level. Crossing Lines is nothing other than the program's attempts to establish precisely such a dialogue. And the juxtaposition of the free line such as has been expressed by Wianta and Spicher - each in his own way - is a prime example of this cross-cultural exploration.

I think Spicher understood the full meaning of the expected dialogue through art only when he met Made Wianta and entered into dialogue with him. The bold visual linear statements he made from the beginning were, and still remain, an essential component of the program. Wianta, conversely, began intuitively with the lines before going on to systematise them during subsequent developments.

While gradually broadening the possibilities of visual expression, Wianta's lines became more than mere contours or introductions to form, eventually acquiring an autonomous presence, especially when he introduced stylistic elements that added up to those already present in works from his previous 'periods'.



Blooming - Fading, 2018, 100 cm x 70 cm
Ink and Watercolor on Paper



Art and Peace Made Wianta, Bali 10 December 1999.

At the end of 1999, to be precise December 10, 1999, at Padang Galak Beach, Sanur, Wianta created a colossal art project: Art and Peace. Combining Happening Art and Installation Art, it involved some 2,000 dancers - students from local high schools, 2,000 meters of banners emblazoned with messages of peace, and 2 helicopters. The event lasted 5 days in tandem with various other supporting art activities. In this work, Wianta addressed social and humanitarian issues, and his statement was delivered with the energy of a tidal wave. Indeed, Wianta expressing here the idea of lines as waves via the medium of the performing arts and choreography, but he also painted lines as waves in a series of works that he called the 'Wave' series, and which later became juxtaposed with Spicher's 'Eternal Line'.

In Spicher's work, the line moves slowly but surely and deliberately in the direction of freely autonomous elements, resulting in an atmosphere of quiet contemplation. There is an eastern element - contemplation - but just as Wianta is in essence uninfluenced by the West or Europe, so too is Spicher in essence uninfluenced by Bali or Indonesia. Both artists manage to find their own freedom within - and beyond - their own culture. In time, Wianta indeed ceased to feel concerned by the labels Western and Eastern, focusing instead on himself and his own art.

Spicher, meanwhile, was never worried by the issue of West and East. What mattered to him was positioning himself somewhere in an essentialised way along the line between spontaneous creation and formal repetition, with the line, ever present as a starting point.

Crossing Lines is thus an event, but also a statement: it aims at broadening our understanding of artistic development that goes far beyond stilted categorisation. Wianta and Spicher's experiences in Indonesia and Switzerland enriched them by enabling them to pursue their own individual quest by entering new, enriching cultural territories. Their 'dialogue' has to them been a personal enrichment, and to us a cultural enrichment.

Made Wianta is sadly no longer with us. But his dialogue with Spicher clearly shows how different points of view can actually complement each other, balance each other, support each other, and enrich each other. The artistic 'dialogue' between Stephan Spicher and Made Wianta, while indeed betraying underlining differences, continues to retain its power to unite. To this extent, as dreamed by Urs Ramseyer, Spicher and Wianta have contributed to the creation of a harmonious world, a world in which creativity knows no bounds, and where mutual respect is recognised by all, and where the all world is reduced to a single line.