

THE HISTORY OF INDONESIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE VENICE BIENNALE

Susan Ingham, January 2014.

Indonesian artists initially entered the international dialogue of contemporary art through artists' residencies and, in particular, through international survey exhibitions, biennales and triennials that proliferated from the 1990s onwards. First and still the foremost amongst these is the Venice Biennale and participating in the Venice Biennale became a major aim for certain Indonesian artists and curators. But prior to the first Indonesian pavilion that was mounted in the Biennale in 2013, there had been examples of individual participation and participation in group satellite exhibitions.

The Venice Biennale is, effectively, the template for the biennales so prevalent today. Venice chose an exhibition in 1895 to celebrate silver anniversary of King Umberto and Margherita of Savoy and it was a symbol of nationalism marking the recent unification of Italy. It was one of many exhibitions, expositions or world fairs that were incredibly popular across Europe in the 19th century, but it was unusual with its focus on art. The first exhibition was a financial success and, appropriately for a city with a long history as a cosmopolitan centre, its Biennale became an early example of cultural tourism. Similar aims underpin most of today's contemporary art biennales. They seek to raise the profile of a city, attract visitors, stimulate economic and diplomatic ties and project the local culture into an international context.

Despite its position in relation to the eastern trade routes, until recent times the Venice Biennale has been almost entirely Eurocentric in its selection of work for exhibition. Even now, of those countries allowed to build their own art pavilions in the *Giardini*, the Venetian public gardens, the majority are European. Unless invited by the Biennale director to exhibit in the *Arsenale* exhibition space and the main pavilions, most non European artists displayed their work outside the main biennale areas in satellite exhibitions around the city.

Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia included, had little involvement with the Venice Biennale until after 2000. Affandi, the one Indonesian modern artist who was recognised internationally before the 1990s, was selected to represent Indonesia in the Venice Biennale in 1954 and was awarded a prize, but it was not until 2003 that another Indonesian artist was invited again.



Affandi, *Self Portrait with Pipe*, 1977.

A few Indonesian artists were involved in the satellite exhibitions during the 1990s. Dewa Putu Mokoh from Bali participated in a two-man show in 1993 and Setiawan Sabana, Anusapati and Hendrawan Ryanto were involved in an exhibition in 1997 financed by the Rockefeller Foundation. This exhibition was titled *Modernities and Memories - recent work from the Islamic world*, and shown in the *Zenobio Institute*.

Setiawan, a printmaker, exhibited a conceptual piece that was an installation of printed matter. It emphasised the impermanence of paper as the basis of art works, as paper came from forests that were themselves endangered. He believed that the age of paper in which we live was disappearing. His installation of found objects and paper rubbish challenged the viewer with its lack of aesthetic values, the prosaic, almost ugly arrangement emphasising content over visual attractiveness. He was tapping into an international vocabulary of conceptual art that prioritised the idea over the formal properties of an artwork.



Setiawan Sabana, Left, *Monument of Paper*, 1996, exhibited in **Modernities and Memories - recent work from the Islamic world**, Venice, 1997; and Right: a similar work, *Peradaban Kertas - Kisah-Kisah, Paper Civilization - Legends*, (detail), exhibition, Bentara Budaya, 2005.

By the turn of the century globalised communication contributed to a similarity in form and content of art across national boundaries and critics claimed that art had become homogenised and had lost contact with local character. The push and pull between global influence and local identity continues to be an issue for art in general and, in particular, it became an issue for the Indonesian pavilion in Venice in 2013. For the 50th Biennale of Venice ten years ago, the Biennale Director, Francesco Bonami, and curator Hou Hanru, invited Heri Dono to exhibit in the *Arsenale* in Hou Hanru's section, *Z.O.U. Zone of Urgency*, the first Indonesian artists since Affandi to be so invited.¹ Heri had become the first globetrotting contemporary Indonesian artist and so often, too often, he was the chosen representative of Indonesian art in international survey exhibitions.

Heri's work, *Trojan Cow*, was a large, comic, cow-shaped puppet and a mixed media painting which can be viewed on line on the [Universes-in-universe](#) website. The work used distorted, Wayang-style figures to disguise with humour Heri's pointed criticism of the invasion of Iraq. A Superman figure in cowboy gear represents George W. Bush, a Batman figure is Tony Blair shooting at an oilcan with Saddam Hussein's head on it. The whole is a shadow play drama for the dumb cow which represents the people. Heri typically combined Indonesian Wayang characters with contemporary comic strip figures but their grotesque shapes and leering faces have an uncomfortable, disturbing edge to them. His best work

keeps these elements of play and danger in balance in what was a criticism of Suharto's Indonesia and now has become his commentary on contemporary life.

While Heri was invited to exhibit in the *Arsenale*, a separate group of Indonesian artists had a different experience in a satellite exhibition in Venice. It is assumed that such exhibitions represent their country of origin which would, therefore, coordinate and sponsor it. According to the curator, Amir Sidharta, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Culture was enthusiastic when approached and agreed to provide the airfares for exhibiting artists, but somehow the money 'disappeared'. The artists who attended were either self-funded or forced to organise their own sponsorship.² Arahmaiani was funded by the gallery that represented her in Berlin at the time, Ochs and Preuss; others were subsidised by a successful Balinese artist and one or two, including Mella Jaarsma, dropped out. Individual and private sponsorship, not the Indonesian government's support, has gained exposure for Indonesian art overseas, and this has remained the pattern for Indonesian art in international exhibition.

Arahmaiani, whose activist art concerns both Indonesian and international issues, presented a work in response to a disturbing experience she had while transiting Los Angeles airport en route to Canada, an experience that illustrated stereotypical Western perceptions of Indonesians after 9/11.

On the 11th June 2002 she was arrested by immigration officers at LAX for failing to have a transit visa, interrogated for four hours and eventually held overnight in a hotel room observed by a male officer. She was deeply shocked, as a Muslima, being forced to share a private space with a male, a man who must have been aware of the difficulty of her position, being of a Pakistani origins himself. Arahmaiani believed she was treated in this way because Muslims were being equated with terrorists and Indonesia, being bracketed with the Islamic world, was not recognised as having a separate religious and social character.



Arahmaiani, *11 June 2002*, installation at the 50th Venice Biennale, 2003.

Working from her personal experience, she created a piece in Venice in 2003 titled, *11 June 2002*, which was a reconstruction of the room in which she had been held. She used a color scheme of red and white, the colors of the Indonesian flag, with a design of red hearts over a white bedspread and curtains, a romantic and sentimental design at odds with being forcibly detained and observed. The objects placed in the space also sent conflicting messages: the Qur'an beside a bra and stockings, a Coca Cola machine beside bathroom toiletries - religion

beside intimate items of female clothing and capitalism and consumerism juxtaposed with personal cleanliness. Viewers encountering this bedroom in an exhibition would question what it was about and be drawn in an oblique, Javanese way, into considering the rising tide of anti Islamic paranoia through Arahmaiani's experience in an intimate environment.

The other artists in this satellite exhibition were Dadang Christanto, Tisna Sanjaya and the Balinese artist, Made Wianta. The title was *Mourning of the World* which was a play on words from a comment made by Nehru on visiting Bali in 1950, when he described Bali as 'The Morning of the World'. Just two years after 9/11 and one year after deadly bombs were exploded on Kuta Beach, Bali seemed a 'paradise lost'. This was the starting point for works from all four artists, their work addressing violence and conflict in the modern world.

Another satellite exhibition of Indonesian artists was held for the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, curated by Dwi Marianto. The artists were Entang Wiharso, Noor Ibrahim, Yani Mariani Sastranegara and Krisna Murti. All but Yani Mariani were well established artists, Krisna being the first and best known Indonesian video artist. A description can be read on the [Asia Art Archive](#).



Jompet Kuswidananto, *The Third Realm*, an installation in a Venetian alleyway, Venice, 2011

In 2011 Jompet Kuswidananto installed a work, titled *The Third Realm*, for the 54th Biennale, using the narrow passageways near the *Arsenale* to mount an installation concerning colonial history, a theme he has explored in previous works. This was an independent project organized by Arthub Asia, a non-profit contemporary art initiative, and the Gervasuti Foundation. Although the artworks in both exhibitions addressed Indonesian cultural issues, once again Indonesian art in international exhibition was instigated by private initiative and presented by independent organizations rather than the nation.

The recent **Indonesian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale**, which closed in November 2013, is the most comprehensive example of Indonesian participation so far. A report on that exhibition follows.

Why is the participation of Indonesian artists in the Venice Biennale significant?

First of all it is an example of the shift of cultural and artistic interest away from what had been for so long considered the most important centres of contemporary art, Europe and America, to Asia. Certainly this change of interest had been influenced by Asian economic powerhouses and investment in the art market, but while China predominated, there was an overflow of interest in Southeast Asian artistic activities. Curators and art administrators recognising this shift, were encouraging the inclusion of Asian art in major European survey exhibitions.

But it should be recognised that most Asian countries were not exhibiting on an equal footing with European and American art. Many Asian countries, Indonesia included, did not have an arts infrastructure that supported contemporary art, and Indonesia in particular did not have a cultural history, as did Europe and America, of supporting the visual arts. The art market often operates as a defacto infrastructure for national art while private collectors hold the major works and provide the institutions for their display. Every example of the participation in the Venice Biennale has been the result of private initiatives, and only in the most recent example, in 2013, has the Indonesian government provided anything more than minimal support.

Europe and America remained the dominant powers in globalised contemporary art and exhibiting Indonesian art in this environment was as if showing their wares to the dominant powers - it had a post colonial whiff to it. Why participate? Because recognition in an international forum was a boost to careers when opportunities at home were limited, especially before the downfall of President Suharto in 1998. It raised the profile of artists and sponsors and at the same time validated their country's culture. Time and again sponsors and curators of the Indonesian exhibitions expressed the desire to prove Indonesian contemporary art was equal to any art being exhibited internationally – and of course it was. Indonesian artists, as the result of global communication, were familiar with current debates, styles and media. Between the push towards homogenisation of art and the pull of local identity, the best Indonesian artists expressed issues significant to them in an artistic language that gave it international understanding and recognition.

If this was happening to Indonesian art, something similar was likely to be happening in the contemporary art of other Southeast Asian countries.

¹ Bonami, F., ed., 2003, *La Biennale di Venezia Dreams and Conflicts The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, Padua, La Biennale di Venezia, p.220.

² Emmy Fitri, "Artists say they were left high and dry for Venice event", in *Jakarta Post*, June 1, 2003.
<http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20030601.Q01> accessed 28/02/07.