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INDONESIAN ART entering the global

In the aftermath of modernity, art has indeed only one option: to be contemporary. But “being contemporary” these days means much more than a mindless embrace of the present.¹

In his book, *What is Contemporary Art?* Professor Terry Smith describes contemporary art as “...an intense, expansionist, proliferating global subculture, with its own values and discourse....”². Contending forces compete within contemporaneity, one of which, as Smith recognized, has had particular relevance for non-European, Post colonial and Asian cultures - as he put it, the pressure to enter globalized dialogue was tempered by a post colonial necessity for cultural differentiation. He stated that the “globalizing character is essential to it (Contemporary Art), but it also mobilizes nationalities, and even localisms....”³ It is as if the very forces that give outlet to the expression of local issues and interests are the same forces pressing to make these issues conform to a global standard and these are, therefore, potentially contending forces within Contemporary Art.

By the 1990s it became clear that internationally communications and cultural traffic was changing radically. The term ‘globalization’ was used to describe this transformation and in the fine arts it was marked by the exchange of information and imagery through ever expanding technology, an increasing number of public institutions for modern and contemporary art and an extraordinary number of large-scale survey exhibitions with the ability of artists to transit the globe to them. Christine Clark, the project manager for the Asia-Pacific Triennial held by the Queensland Art Gallery and a selector for Indonesian artists in the 1990s, wrote: “...international exhibitions during the 1990s are part of a larger process of globalization and can be seen as a response to the stimulation and pressure of global culture”.⁴ Late 20th century Contemporary Art provided an opportunity for a small group of Indonesian artists to find outlet on a global stage for local and national issues suppressed at home, and yet to enter this dialogue, the artists and their art had to conform to the requirements of those international exhibitions.

The defining moment in Indonesian history which had a marked impact on Indonesian modern and contemporary art was the establishment of the *Orde Baru*, or the New Order regime, installed by President Suharto after the overthrow of Sukarno in 1965. The regime dominated modern Indonesian culture for three decades, influencing attitudes that persist to the present. The traditional, particularly Javanese, arts and crafts, the *wayang*, *gamelan*, *batik* materials and historic architecture and sculpture, were favoured by the government as these arts were considered to represent Indonesian identity and assist the government in welding a national and cultural unity in an archipelago of diverse ethnic groups. These arts also projected a benign and uncontentious image of the regime for tourism and economic purposes. Existing institutions, such as the *Museum Nasional* that was originally founded by the Dutch, continue to preserve the traditional arts but attempts to found a similar institution to promote Indonesian modern and contemporary art have met with limited results.

Modern art arrived relatively belatedly in Indonesian cultural circles and was strongly identified with *merdeka* or freedom and independence from colonial control rather than avant-garde aesthetic experimentation, a response to modern art that occurred in many Asian countries. Indonesian Modernism did not entirely break with the artistic traditions of the past as in the West, for tradition coexists with the modern; as Julie Ewington, curator of Modern art at the Queensland Art Gallery wrote, the pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras co-exist in everyday Indonesian experience as well as in the arts.⁵

The political coup of 1965, when Suharto was installed, was followed by terrible violence and persecution, which in the arts, effectively split Indonesian Modernism into two streams. Supporters of socio/political art were driven underground while art with a focus on formal and decorative elements became the mainstream modern art in Indonesia. Modern, decorative and abstract art was supported by a voraciously expanding art market, it was the predominant style taught in art schools, and, when permission was sought to exhibit, politically neutral art was favoured by those with the power of authorization. Politically sensitive art or art which implied a criticism of the regime became potentially dangerous to exhibit and did not find an adequate outlet in Indonesia until after the fall of Suharto in 1998. The New Order regime continued to suppress dissent, more vigorously in literature than the visual arts as the brutal detention of Indonesia's major modern writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer on the island of Buru testifies; nevertheless Indonesian artists, such as the major modern painter, Hendra Gunawan, were imprisoned, in Hendra's case from 1965 until 1978.⁶ The artist, Hardi, wrote "...there was still fear of recriminations if artists expressed their attitudes to social problems through

their work...”⁷ and Semsar Siahaan, perhaps one of the most controversial activist artists in the 1980s, had his exhibition in Yogyakarta in 1988 closed by the police on the grounds that he was “staging the exhibition to humiliate the authorities”.⁸

Yet by the 1980s the media revolution was beyond the control of censorship in Indonesia and information was flooding in through film, television and print. Small groups of artists became interested in exploring contemporary issues, beginning in 1975 with the members of *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*, the New Art Movement, who claimed that true Indonesian culture was the modernization that was engulfing urban Indonesians. Jim Supangkat argued that this group, of which he was a member, marked a turning point in Indonesian art. Their art, particularly with its use of installations, signified a break with modern art and its conventional hierarchy prioritizing painting and sculpture. In his article in the first edition of the Australian journal, *Art and Asia Pacific* in 1993, he called this art ‘contemporary art’, saying:

Contemporary art emerged in Indonesia in 1975 when a group of young artists organized a movement known as the Indonesian New Art Movement. This movement can be regarded as the pioneer in introducing contemporary principles...Even so, it took nearly ten years for contemporary art to flower in Indonesia. And it will be another ten years before installation art is regularly exhibited and discussed.⁹

Terry Smith wrote, “...in the years around 1989, shifts from modern to contemporary art occurred in every cultural milieu throughout the world, and did so distinctively in each.”¹⁰ If the term, Postmodernism, is used at all, Smith considers the term marks the transition between the two. Debate over Postmodernism developed in Indonesia in the early 1990s and exploded around the 9th *Jakarta Art Biennale* in 1993, curated by Supangkat, who held that the predominance of installation art was a feature of Postmodernism; but since then few have revisited these arguments and many consider the debate remains unresolved.

The public response to contemporary and experimental art in Indonesia was illustrated by Astri Wright’s description of Heri Dono’s solo exhibition in Jakarta in June, 1988. Wright reported that no Indonesian critic reviewed the exhibition and no works sold until her review was published in the English language *Jakarta Post*, and then nine of the ten small works that sold were bought by foreigners and expats.¹¹ Heri Dono’s work, whether painting, installation or performance, including his *wayang* shadow puppet plays, used humour to disguise his exploration of the repressive aspects of the Suharto regime, and when it was effectively silenced at home, this content executed in experimental media found favour with the selectors

for international exhibitions. Caroline Turner, then Deputy Director of the Queensland Art Gallery, co-founder of the Asia-Pacific Triennial Project and a selector of Indonesian art for the Asia-Pacific Triennial said, “In many cases, exposure overseas was of great significance for (Indonesian artists) in legitimizing their role within Indonesia, in enabling them to meet with like-minded artists and intellectuals internationally, and allowing their work to reach a wider audience...”¹²

The Indonesian artists selected for the first Asia-Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1993 illustrate the transition from the modern to the contemporary that was occurring in Indonesian art. Of the nine Indonesian artists invited to exhibit, five artists submitted paintings that were in the tradition of modern art while three artists focused on installation work. A.D. Pirous and Srihardi Soedarsono, artists who had been extraordinarily successful in the Indonesian art market, presented abstract paintings of rich colours and surface textures. Three other painters referred indirectly to conditions in Indonesia: Dede Eri Supria, for example, depicting ‘the concrete jungle’ springing up in Indonesian cities and Ivan Sagito explored a psychological dimension to repression in Indonesian society. But it was the artists, Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto and FX Harsono who specifically used their art to explore cultural issues and voice criticism of the social and political regime through installations and performance.

Heri Dono’s work, *Gamelan of Rumour* was an installation of mechanically-operated hammers striking gong – like pieces laid out on the floor in a way similar to a traditional *gamelan* orchestra, yet there were no musicians and the sound emitting from the work was not music. Two themes surfaced in this work which Heri came often to explore, the first being the powerlessness of the people who must function automatically when instructed, and the second, signalled by the title, the confusion between truth and rumour, the gap between government announcements and public understanding. FX Harsono’s work was a continuation of his concern about environmental exploitation and the damage done to rural communities. Titled *Just the Rights*, it depicted rag figures bound to sections of a door which were leaning against banana fronds. Dadang Christanto’s installation was a series of suspended posts pierced by pegs also made from natural materials such as bamboo and palm leaf and which were reminiscent of indigenous memorial poles. This work, as all Dadang’s work, was an explicit plea for the victims of the bloodbath in 1965 of which his ethnic Chinese family was one; but his work extends from the personal to all the victims of Suharto’s regime and victims everywhere. The long title began with: *For those who have been killed*, and continued,

For those:

Who are poor

Who are suffer(ing)

Who are oppressed

Who are voiceless

Who are powerless

Who are burdened

Who are victims of violence

Who are victims of a dupe

Who are victims of injustice.

It was a powerful piece and Dadang continued to be selected for later Triennials in Queensland, eventually making his home there. Dadang and Heri became part of a small band of Indonesian artists who entered the discourse of international contemporary art, globe-trotting between biennales while Indonesian Modernist painters ceased to be selected.

Biennales, the generic term for regular survey exhibitions of international art, impose their own requirements. They have national, political and economic interests to serve so tend to favour a certain type of impressive art in experimental media that provide a spectacle for the audience. Melissa Chiu, Museum Director for the Asia Society, New York, and Vice President of their Global Art Programs, wrote that “...international curators (were) interested almost exclusively in artists working in experimental media, which matched their own ideas of more progressive contemporary art”.¹³ The concept of large scale survey exhibitions was established in the West with the first biennale of visual art in Venice in the late 19th century, and recognition from Western institutions with their considerable financial backing and powerful connections continued to provide the imprimatur. When biennales developed outside the Euro-American centres, the model remained the same and international networking systems developed between them using the same contacts and curators. Observers began to speak of a ‘transnational standard’ of aesthetic practices, sometimes critically, as in the well-known phrase, ‘BICCA’, or ‘Biennale International Club Class Art’, coined by the conservative British art critic, Peter Fuller, that implied the same curators flew around the world and as a result, all art was beginning to look the same.

Invitations to international biennales exposed artists to international debates and contacts with other artists resulted in the exchange of ideas and cross influences. It helped to speak English and Indonesian artists and curators found they needed English to participate in international

forums and to obtain residencies and scholarships, even those offered by the Netherlands, the ex colonial power.¹⁴ There was a pressure on artists to conform to the requirements of international exhibition and develop skills in making submissions or explaining work. In the case of Nindityo Adipurnomo, he was the only Indonesian artist selected for the *Fukuoka Triennial* in 2002 because his submission addressed the curatorial brief of ‘collaboration’, his work having involved the participation of local Indonesian craftsmen. Biennales seemed to favour art that imparted an aura of its source and Indonesian artists became aware that overseas curators had a predilection for ‘national identity’ and art with ‘local color’. Nindityo Adipurnomo said: “They try to evaluate what is ‘Indonesian’, so they’re looking for something exotic”. In an image taken for the *Fukuoka Triennial*, his profile is equated with the *Wayang* figure protruding from his back pack, although his work did not relate to the *Wayang*.

Local issues and histories needed explanation and references can be ‘lost in translation’. The Indonesian artist and curator, Asmudjo Irianto, in an article about the *Pancaroba Indonesia* exhibition held in California in 1999, said that it would not be surprising if American audiences found the subject matter difficult. He wrote:

Most works represent a narrative of social tragedy and have many layers of other hidden meanings; they represent specific problems and particular iconographies that are unfamiliar to American audiences, and which can only be understood through a knowledge of local conditions in Indonesia - and not only of Indonesia’s social, cultural and political milieu, but also its art world.¹⁵

The very quality of local identity that global selectors sought was in danger of being lost in the requirements and scale of exhibition. Certain artworks are not conducive to museum display: they may be too fragile or architectural in scale – although it has been remarkable what museums have been able to recreate. They may be the anarchic product of an art happening or they may be dependent on their original site or times and when recreated, their raw energy is diffused. Tisna Sanjaya’s installation, *The Monument of thirty-three years of Thinking with the Knee* in the Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1996 was constructed from remnants of a community action where large up-side-down bamboo figures had been marched around Bandung and then placed in significant public spaces. A bamboo screen in the centre of the work shows Habibie, Suharto’s nominated successor, kissing Suharto’s hand. ‘Thinking with the knee’ is an Indonesian proverb that meant bending to another’s authority and not using your brain, that is, to be stupid, and ‘thirty-three years’ directly referred to Suharto’s years in power. The screen had been installed in the front garden of Tisna’s house as a criticism of current political

corruption but the police and local Muslim fundamentalists objected, seeing it more as a criticism of Islam because the figures were wearing the *Peci*, or the black Javanese cap that has become associated with male Muslim dress.¹⁶ The histories associated with the work had considerable meaning at that time and in that place but, removed to an overseas institution, interpretation was needed for the audience and the urgency and energy of the piece were diminished. The very nature of international forums with many pieces side by side clamouring for attention, can mute the individual message.

Global Contemporary Art has contributed to important dialogue between communities and major works of art have had emotional impact across borders of language and experience. While international exhibitions provide a platform for the social and political issues of home, there is a tension between the globalizing tendencies identified by Terry Smith and the expression of particular local preoccupations and histories. Although both aspects are significant, there can be a disparity between an image with local meaning and an image which is universally understood and loss can occur between angst and entertainment and between message and spectacle.

¹ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* University of Chicago Press, 2009, p.1.

² Ibid, pp 241.

³ Ibid, pp242.

⁴ Christine Clark, "When the alternative becomes the mainstream: operating globally without national infrastructure", in *Cemeti Art House, 15 years Cemeti Art House: exploring vacuum, 1988-2003*, Yogyakarta, Cemeti Art House, 2003, p. 122.

⁵ Julie Ewington, 1995, "Five Elements - An abbreviated account of installation art in South-East Asia", *Art and Asia Pacific*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p.114.

⁶ Astri Wright, *Soul, spirit, and mountain preoccupations of contemporary Indonesian painters*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1994, note in particular Chapter 8 concerning the life and experience of Gunawan.

⁷ Brita Lee Miklouho - Maklai lists a number of cases of repression in the arts in the 1970s in her work, 1991, *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art since 1966*, Discipline of Asian Studies, The Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, pp.69 – 77.

⁸ Purnomo, Setianingsih, 1995, *The Voice of the Muted People in Modern Indonesian Art*, Masters (Honours) thesis, The University of Western Sydney, Nepean, Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, Art History Department, p. 88, footnote.

⁹ Jim Supangkat, 1993, "Indonesia Report, A different Modern Art", *Art and AsiaPacific*, (Issue September 1993, inaugural edition), pp. 20 - 24. The journal, originally published by Fine Arts Press, Sydney, Australia in 1993, later became *Art AsiaPacific* and in 2003 was purchased and relaunched from New York.

¹⁰ Terry Smith, op. cit. pp.6 – 7.

¹¹ Wright, A., 1994, *Soul, spirit, and mountain preoccupations of contemporary Indonesian painters*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, footnote, p. 238.

¹² Turner, C., ed., 2005, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, p.211.

¹³ Melissa Chiu, “Asian Contemporary Art: An Introduction”, c. Oxford University Press, 2005, *Grove Art Online*.

¹⁴ General scholarships in the Netherlands require a high level of English language, note the Netherlands Education Centre website. The Rijksakademie, which has provided residencies for Indonesian artists including Nindityo Adipurnomo, also stated that their language requirement was English. Email, receptie@rijksakademie.nl 06/02/2006.

¹⁵ Asmudjo Jono Irianto, “An Unsettled Season, political art of Indonesia”, *Art AsiaPacific*, no. 28, 2000, p.83. The *Pancaroba Indonesia* exhibition was held in 1999 at the Pacific Bridge Contemporary Southeast Asian Art gallery in Oakland, California.

¹⁶ Interview, Tisna Sanjaya in his home in Bandung, 04/07/2001. See also Asmudjo Irianto, “Tisna Sanjaya: The monument of thirty-three years of thinking with the knee”, in Queensland Art Gallery 1996, *The second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, p.66.