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EXPO ART: INDONESIAN ART and INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION

**Susan Ingham,
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Indonesian modern and contemporary art was barely known outside Indonesia before the 1990s while their traditional arts, historic crafts and sculpture, gamelan music, the wayang shadow plays and batik received enthusiastic support when exhibited abroad. In the 1950s and 60s a few modern artists received grants and travelled outside Indonesia to exhibit in Europe and America, but their work was rarely seen in major art venues. One unusual example of this was Affandi, perhaps the most famous Indonesian artist at the time, who, with other artists, presented Indonesian painting at the Bienal of Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1953 and went on to exhibit at the Venice Biennale in 1954 where he received a prize.¹ His experience remained unique for some 40 years until Heri Dono was invited to exhibit in the Venice Biennale in 2003. Two elements combined to encourage the exposure of Indonesian modern and contemporary art outside Indonesia. The first was a major theoretical shift in Western perceptions of non European art and the second was an environment inside Indonesia which was not conducive to the exhibition of critically edged, experimental art.

Until the late 20th century Asian modern art was generally treated as a peripheral copy of the Modernist original that, it was presumed, was a European invention. It was considered a pastiche rather than a valid interpretation, a perspective that was reinforced by residual colonial attitudes. The first major exhibition of Indonesian modern art, a travelling exhibition organized by the Festival of Indonesia in 1990, had difficulty finding galleries and museums in the United States that were willing to be venues for the exhibition and in two cities the works were shown in anthropological museums. According to Joseph Fischer who co curated the exhibition, *Modern Indonesian art: three generations of tradition and change, 1945-1990*, this was in part “... a reflection in such institutions of the lack of any real experience with anything modern from Indonesia or from other Asian countries except Japan”.² The Indonesian curator and art historian, Dwi Marianto, had a similar experience when the exhibition was mounted in Amsterdam in 1993 by the Gate Foundation. The Dutch curators

rejected some of the paintings as ‘mere copies’ of European Surrealism when the Indonesian artists had reinterpreted a surreal style to express a sense of psychological tension and alienation in their own society.³

But the tide was changing. From the 1980s onwards a number of European and American cultural institutions interested in exhibiting non-Western art began to reposition their curatorial strategies, influenced by the postcolonial theories of such writers as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Said used the term, ‘Orientalism’, to describe the way in which non-Western cultures were interpreted, stating that it was “...a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” He used Michel Foucault’s concept of a discourse, a system of power relations linked to language and knowledge, to define the amalgamation of ideas that constitute orientalizing.⁴ More importantly, Said questioned the Eurocentric view of the Orient that perceived Euro-America as the centre and Asia, (including Indonesia) the periphery. Homi Bhabha, in his work, *The Location of Culture*, carried Said’s project further by indicating that Occidental and Oriental, colonizer and colonized, were not fixed positions and that a process of hybridization destabilizes the concept of a ‘homogenizing force’. The process he called ‘mimicry’ opened the possibility that a colonized culture could translate the dominant culture into innovative forms that constituted a ‘third space’ of cultural resistance.⁵

Between the *Primitivism* exhibition curated by William Rubin in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, organized by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris in 1989, there was a major shift in perspectives. In the 1984 exhibition non European objects were treated as primitive artefacts for Western modern art to plunder as a source of inspiration, but by 1989, Martin was seeking to exhibit Western and non Western art on equal terms. Both exhibitions provoked considerable debate and new ideas about non European art were aired. The criterion for Martin’s selection was that the art be connected to some perceived authentic culture and, although a problematic concept, the international survey exhibitions of non European art that followed in the 1990s continued this preference. There were contradictory forces in operation. On the one hand selecting art that was connected to its origins recognized cultural diversity, although it reiterated the Western fascination with the exotic, while on the other hand, the demands of global display tended to homogenize the art and obscure local character. Local references may require explanation or be ‘lost in translation’, as Asmudjo Irianto indicated when writing in connection with the *Pancaroba Indonesia* exhibition held in Oakland, California in 1999.

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.”⁶

International survey exhibitions, or biennales as they came to be known, whether they were held every two years or more, were the most visible form globalization in the arts. More than just art, they served political and economic agendas and they were expected to grease the diplomatic channels between nations. The Venice Biennale, the first and oldest, was founded as part of the ceremonies marking the unification of Italy and to attract tourists to finance restoration projects for the city. More recently, Brisbane in Australia and Fukuoka in Japan sought to raise their profile and participate in the Asian economic boom of the 1990s by holding major art shows. The *Asia-Pacific-Triennial* mounted in the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, and the Fukuoka Asian Art Show (later a triennial), were among the first survey exhibitions to show contemporary Indonesian artists. By the end of the 1990s a remarkable number of biennales were flourishing outside Europe and America. A common aim was to blur ‘distinctions between center and margin’ and ‘break from the past of discrimination and exclusivity’ in relation to the West, as a statement from the Gwangju Biennale held in South Korea declared.⁷

Where content was concerned, there was a marked preference for art addressing socio/political issues in the work selected. Caroline Turner, co-founder of the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* project and a selector of Indonesian art, said, “I would argue that much of the most interesting art that is coming out of these countries deals with issues that are very much connected to changes taking place in these societies”.⁸ Biennales favoured art that made a statement and provided a spectacle with a strong element of entertainment to attract the general public. Installations outweighed traditional art forms or two dimensional works on a wall, although paintings were not excluded. Melissa Chiu, Museum Director at the New York Asia Society, wrote that artists working in local artistic traditions were “...frequently overlooked by international curators interested almost exclusively in artists working in experimental media, which matched their own ideas of more progressive contemporary art”.⁹ As well as having socio/political content and working with experimental media, artists needed certain skills in navigating international artistic protocols such as making submissions

or addressing a curatorial brief. They needed to be free to travel to take up residencies or to speak at seminars and it helped to speak English, the lingua franca of globalization.

A small number of Indonesian artists met these criteria, best known amongst whom were Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto, Arahmaiani, Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo. Others included FX Harsono, Moelyono, Agus Suwage, Tisna Sanjaya, Krisna Murti and Marintan Sirait, although Marintan initially was identified as German.¹⁰ Many were also painters, but it was their installations and performance art addressing Indonesian issues that was particularly sought. Heri made a series of installations and paintings that expressed criticism of the Suharto regime and the repressive society it had produced. He regularly used a variety of media and technological scrap, creating grotesque figures based on the wayang in a playful manner that disguised his criticism of the regime which, if it had been overt, would have been dangerous. Dadang referred to victims of repression under the regime, both recently and in the past, and particularly ethnically Chinese Indonesians like himself, who have been targeted and persecuted. His installations have varied from piles of heads to full sized figures in terracotta which he often accompanies with a performance. Arahmaiani, primarily a performance artist, addressed feminist arguments familiar to biennale selectors, she alone raising issues in her work concerning the patriarchal nature of the predominantly Muslim/Javanese society. Nindityo and his wife, Mella, focused on issues of culture. For more than ten years Nindityo explored the significance of the *konde*, the elaborate Javanese hairpiece that is an indication of status, while Mella developed the *jilbab*, or headscarf, into a series of floor length body coverings in media from frog skins to canvas tents that raised issues of gender and ethnicity.

All five artists became part of the international art circuit in the 1990s to such a degree they were considered expatriates at home. The introduction to the catalogue for Dadang's first exhibition in Indonesia since 1995 said: "The works of these three visual artists (Heri Dono, Eddie Hara and Dadang Christanto) are more recognised within the global art circle than in their own country. This is because they exhibit their works more frequently in foreign countries, or also because they happen to reside abroad more often."¹¹ Contacts led to referrals, as when the curator, Jim Supangkat, selected Dadang for the *Havana Bienal* in Cuba in 1994. Dadang met Apinan Poshyananda there who then selected him for exhibition in the New York Asia Society's *Tradition and Tensions* exhibition in 1996. Such exposure validated their work and these few artists were repeatedly selected and referred through the power lines of the art world until they became globe-trotting art stars.

While their work coincided with the curatorial preferences of the international selectors and was understood in the context of biennales, at home the environment was not conducive to critically edged, experimental art and they received little support until *Reformasi* and the downfall of President Suharto in 1998. The Suharto regime, which had been in power since 1965, had become increasingly authoritarian and had a history of repressing dissent, sometimes forcibly, as with the imprisonment of writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and artists such as Hendra Gunawan. Student activism was quashed in the 1970s and politics banned from campus life under the *NKK* program, or 'the normalization of campus life',¹² yet against this repression there was an increasing access to global information through television and the media and, by the 1990s, the Internet.¹³ Teaching in the tertiary art institutions in Yogyakarta, Bandung and Jakarta remained conservative but there were protests from art students against the general predominance of conventional painting. In 1974 FX Harsono was expelled from his art institution, *ASRI*,¹⁴ in Yogyakarta, for being part of *Desember Hitam* or Black December protest against prizes in the Jakarta National Biennial of Painting being awarded to conservative work. Nearly twenty years later Dadang Christanto and Heri Dono were amongst those protesting restrictions on entry to the Yogyakarta Biennale that similarly favoured established painters. They held art events on the streets and in the railway yards in 1992, Heri performing with grave diggers from the cemetery in a work titled *Kuda Binal*, or Wild Horse, wild, or *binal* being a word play on biennale.

The regime upheld the traditional arts and provided little if any support for modern art. Even today Indonesia does not have a public museum and exhibition space for modern and contemporary art in the manner, for example, of its closest neighbours, Singapore and Malaysia.¹⁵ The outlet for modern art was through the increasing number of commercial art galleries but the market favoured non contentious, decorative and abstract painting rather than installations or experimental work. It was in response to the lack of public infrastructure or support from the commercial gallery system that Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo founded the *Cemeti* art gallery in Yogyakarta in 1988 for the exhibition and sale of contemporary experimental art. Heri Dono was the first artist to hold a solo exhibition there. *Cemeti* was seen as an alternative to the mainstream art galleries and was the first port of call for visiting curators selecting artists for international survey exhibitions. By the late 1990s it had become a gatekeeper for contemporary Indonesian art and a launching pad for artists' careers, including their own.

Another facilitator in the process of introducing Indonesian art to global exhibition was the artist turned curator, Jim Supangkat. His curatorial career began in 1992 as a consultant to the Japan Foundation for their exhibition, *New Art from Southeast Asia* and he effectively became the writer, curator and historian for the Indonesian participants in biennales and survey exhibitions around the world. According to Supangkat, Japanese and Australian exhibitions “...started us thinking, here in Indonesia, who are we? It’s the first time we encountered the so-called art world and started to understand art discourse. It is from that I developed the tools to debate Indonesian art.”¹⁶ The lack of public infrastructure for modern art or curatorial training in Indonesia contributed to Supangkat’s lone status in the 1990s and he became the public face of Indonesian contemporary art in international conferences, seminars and symposiums.

This local/global exchange has increased the understanding of Indonesia art and culture outside, and raised the profile of contemporary art inside, Indonesia. There are though, attendant problems, not least among them being the repeated selection of these same artists while other Indonesian art rarely sees the light of day in global exhibitions. The modernist painters, so successful in the local art market, and traditional arts and crafts tend not to be selected. It seemed biennales incorporated traditional art only when it was transformed by contemporary practice, as, for example, with Heri Dono’s use of the wayang. Tradition tends to be associated with repetition while contemporary art was associated with invention and experimentation.¹⁷ The art of activist youth and collective groups, so prevalent in Indonesia, is also rarely seen in international survey exhibitions. Multimedia community events are difficult to stage within the format of a static, large scale exhibition and, when shown, can appear dry documentation drained of energy.¹⁸

Biennales have been criticized for these exclusions and the tendency towards a homogenous contemporary art form with the same artists and curators forming an international club. These criticisms must be balanced against the opportunity to give global exposure to local issues and increased international appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures.

¹ As reported by Claire Holt, in, *Art in Indonesia: continuities and change*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1967, pp.321-322. Claire Holt and the Indonesian Studies group at Cornell University were active in gaining some grants for Indonesian modern artists in the 1960s. These seemed to gain support on the basis they encouraged anti Communist sentiments during the Cold War.

² Joseph Fischer, ed., 1990, *Modern Indonesian art: three generations of tradition and change, 1945-1990*, Jakarta, New York, Introduction, p.12.

³ Marianto, Martinus Dwi, 1995, *Surrealist painting in Yogyakarta*, University of Wollongong PhD thesis, unpublished version, pp. 11 - 13.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Penguin, 1995.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, London, New York, Routledge, 1994.

⁶ The *Pancaroba Indonesia* exhibition was held in 1999 at the Pacific Bridge Contemporary Southeast Asian Art gallery in Oakland, California. The quotation is from an article by Asmudjo Jono Irianto titled, "An Unsettled Season, political art of Indonesia", *Art AsiaPacific*, no. 28, 2000, p.83.

⁷ See <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/gwangju/english.htm> accessed 26/02/07, and also the websites of the Fukuoka Triennial and Shanghai Biennale, accessed 08/07/05.

⁸ 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, interviewed by Jennifer Moran for Pandanus Books, *Newsletter*, Spring 2005, issue 6, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, for the publication of the book, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Caroline Turner.

⁹ Melissa Chiu, Museum Director and Curator for Contemporary Asian and Asian-American art, Asia Society, New York, "Asian Contemporary Art: An Introduction", c. Oxford University Press, 2005, *Grove Art Online*, <http://www.groveart.com/grove-owned/art/asiancontintro.html> accessed 30/04/07.

¹⁰ Eventually the effects of globalization were recognized in identifying artist's country of origin. Both Mella Jaarsma, Dutch – born and educated, and Marintan Serait of German-Indonesian parentage, live permanently in Indonesia and make work that is identified as Indonesian. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list and, for example, certain Balinese artists were also selected for different exhibitions.

¹¹ Bentara Budaya administration introduction for the catalogue of the exhibition by Dadang Christanto, titled *Kengerian tak Terucapkan*, The Unspeakable Horror, curated by Hendro Wiyanto in 2002 at the Bentara Budaya exhibition space, Jakarta, July 4 – 14, p 23.

¹² *NKK, Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus*, or the normalization of campus life, required students to concentrate on reading, writing and conducting research, according to the Minister of Education and Culture, Daoed Joesoef. *Badan Koordinasi Kemahasiswaan* or bodies for the co-ordination of student affairs, known as *BKK*, enforced the policy with censorship, harassment and informers on campus.

¹³ Public access through *Warnet* or Internet cafes was provided in Yogyakarta, for example, by September 1996, see Hill David T and Sen Krishna, 1997 "Wiring the Warung to Global Gateways", *Indonesia* 63 1997, p. 68.

¹⁴ *ASRI, Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia*, the Indonesian Art Academy in Yogyakarta was later renamed *Institut Seni Indonesia* or *ISI*, the Indonesian Art Institute. The other two major art academies are the Fine Arts department of *Institut Teknologi Bandung*, Bandung Technological Institute, or *ITB*, and the *Institut Kesenian Jakarta*, Jakarta Art Institute or *IKJ*, part of the complex that includes the *TIM* culture center in Jakarta.

¹⁵ The *Galeri Nasional Indonesia* is a space for hire. It holds exhibitions financed by private interests and sells the work from the floor. The Singapore Art Museum, in contrast, aims to be a repository for Southeast Asian art and part of the international art circuit. It has held significant exhibitions of Indonesian art history as well as solo shows of Indonesian artists.

¹⁶ Supangkat, interview, Bandung, 24/04/2005.

¹⁷ The innovative batik art of *Brahma Tirta Sari*, for example, was seen in the *Asia-Pacific Triennial, APT/3* in 1999 but on the whole their work is shown in media specific exhibitions for textiles. See: <http://www.brahmatirtasari.org/cv2.html>

¹⁸ The diversity of these groups makes it hard to generalize. Some groups don't consider themselves artists and art is only part of a range of activities supporting their activism, as in the case of *Tanam Untuk Kehidupan*

(*TUK*), whereas *ruangrupa* and *Taring Padi* prioritize art making. *Ruangrupa* were exhibited in the Gwangju Biennale in 2002.