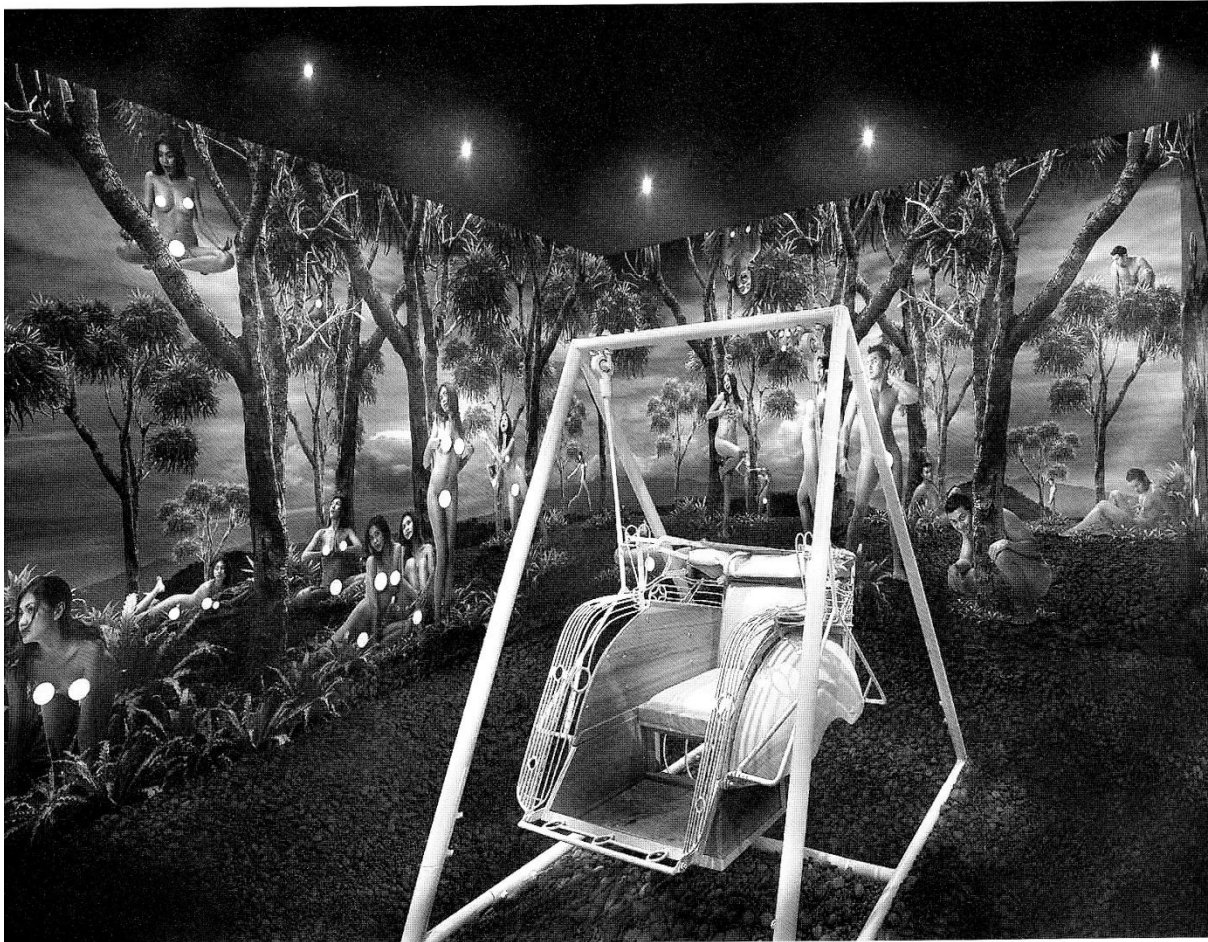


CULTURAL ISSUES IN INDONESIAN BIENNALS

Pressure Points



THIS IS THE SECOND *BROADSHEET* TEXT LOOKING AT ISLAM, CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND WORLD EVENTS, FOLLOWING GOENAWAN MOHAMAD'S *MUNCH, ISLAM AND CATASTROPHES* IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.

SUE INGHAM'S PAPER WAS GIVEN AT THE *INDONESIA CULTURE WORKSHOP, ARTS, CULTURE AND POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE SINCE SUHARTO*, SCHOOL OF ASIAN LANGUAGES & STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, LAUNCESTON 16-18 DECEMBER, 2005.

TOLERATING THE INTOLERANT, WITH JIM SUPANGKAT ON THE *DCP BIENNALE 2005*, IS COURTESY *IN-UNIVERSE, 'CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC WORLD'* (<http://www.univeislam/eng/2005/032/index.html>)
READ FURTHER ABOUT THIS ON: ITS NEW WEBSITE: http://universesislamic_world/

SUE INGHAM

In November 2005 the artwork, *Pinkswing Park*, by Agus Suwage and Davy Linggar was exhibited in the second Indonesian international exhibition of visual arts, known as the CP, or *Center Point Biennale*. The *CP Biennale* was organised by the Center Point Foundation, established by Jim Supangkat, who is the public face of contemporary Indonesian art in the international art world and Tjrianan Djie, an Indonesian entrepreneur. The Foundation opened an Asian gallery in Washington DC, known as the CP Artspace, but it proved too expensive to transport artworks to Washington and the art space has closed, though a CP Artspace continues in Jakarta.¹ The *CP Biennale*, like many biennales and triennials established in the 1990s, was intended to place the local contemporary art in an international context. In particular it was to position Jakarta in the international art circuit and alter the perceptions of a few Western art institutions that were considered part of art world hegemony.² In his opening comments in the catalogue to the first *CP Biennale*, Tjrianan Djie stated that the *Biennale* was to promote, "the understanding (that) the international world has yet to be made comprehensive by taking into account the non-Western parts."³

The format for the *CP Biennale* was, as always, a western one—the Euro-American model transplanted to Jakarta—where it was supposed take root, hybridise with local art forms and develop into a new species. But some elements in this gene-splicing were anachronistic. The work, *Pinkswing Park* and events surrounding it, illustrate some of the issues.

The work has many of the elements found in the rest of Agus Suwage's oeuvre. Suwage takes the contemporary life and events around him and explores their significance at a personal level through his own image. Rather than being personal expression, his external appearance is a starting point to explore internal meaning. This is done usually with humour, sometimes irony, occasionally acid and at its best, with a level of psychological tension. He is gifted, perceptive, wicked and assumes the right of the modern artist to present whatever content in whatever form interests him.

The personal references in *Pinkswing Park* are more oblique. Suwage lives in Yogyakarta where the *becaks* are common, but it is also a rural form of transportation that is somewhat anachronistic in the traffic of a modern urban city. There are social connotations attached to a *becak* for it is the cheapest form of transport and there is a touch of the colonial hierarchical relationship between passenger and driver. But to Suwage it is also a pleasurable form of transport—he has used them in other installations and owns one himself. What he is pondering here is contemporary urban life in Indonesia today with all of its anachronisms, which is in keeping with the theme of the *Biennale*, 'Urban/Culture'. Urban culture is a garden of earthly delights, like Eden, but populated by the Sinetron soap opera star, Anjasmara and a model, Isabel Yahya. They were not actually nude when the photos were taken in Davy's studio and following the shoot, Davy used digital technology to reconstruct the images and place them in Suwage's paintings of a forest.⁴

Because of the reference to a soapie star, the media had a field day, which prompted the interest of an Islamic organisation, FPI—Front Pembela Islam or Defender of Islam. The FPI considered the work pornographic as it "exposed the *aurat*" of Anjas and Isabel. *Aurat* can have different interpretations as to how much of the body is involved—just the genitals or the entire

body including the face and is therefore linked to the wearing of the veil. The FPI declared that in the month prior to Ramadan, the artwork was particularly offensive to Muslims. They reported Davy Linggar, the exhibition committee and Anjas and Isabel to the police and insisted the work be taken down. A crowd of two hundred and fifty supporters appeared at the exhibition site, the museum of the Bank Indonesia in the old Jakarta district of the Kota, to add pressure to the demands.

Other works both in this and the first *CP Biennale* contained nudes which did not have their vital parts obscured;⁵ it was the celebrity of the individuals depicted that provided the opportunity for manipulation through publicity. The *CP Biennale* was being dragged into Indonesian power politics that uses religion to exert influence. The numerous Islamic factions vie with each other and press for greater influence in a government that is technically secular. FPI, which has Saudi Arabian connections, has typically used the masses for public protest, threats and in some cases in the past, violence, so the response from the organisers was not to remove the work but to put it behind a screen. Other artists in the exhibition then either covered their works or removed them as a protest against such censorship and some artists were critical of Jim Supangkat, who was the chief curator, for not discussing the issues with the protestors.⁶ Supangkat responded:

*I don't want to debate it with different people from different levels. There is no point debating the issue if I am talking about urban/culture whereas others are talking about religion.*⁷

He closed the exhibition and declared that this was the last *CP Biennale*—there would be no more. Many articles noted Supangkat was disheartened, particularly by the media, for misleading the public over reports of Anjas' and Isabel's nudity. He said, "At the moment there is chaos. It can be said that the *Biennale* is not respected. We cannot attain the designated theme."⁸ He felt Indonesia was not ready for an international art biennale but concluded, "I hope other curators will have beliefs that differ from my own evaluation."⁹

The cancellation of the *CP Biennale* was the final episode that encapsulated a range of issues. First of all this was a privately funded biennale. As the history of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney testifies, surviving without government funding is fraught with difficulties. The first *CP Biennale* was held in the Galeri Nasional, but despite its name and impressive site it does not function as a government funded national gallery does in the West. One of the greatest difficulties facing the arts community in Indonesia is the lack of government funded infrastructure. Without it all manner of alternative mechanisms are used to exhibit, discuss and teach art, many of them effective and creative but often unstable. Art magazines come and go, self-styled independent curators juggle multiple occupations to survive, and exhibition spaces begun with impeccable motives disappear overnight. The Galeri Nasional was an attempt by Jim Supangkat and Professor Dr. Edi Sedyawati, the then Director General of Culture, to establish a national museum of modern art. This museum was to house artworks from the government departmental collection and run an exhibition program that would link Indonesia to the international art world. Between 1995 and 1999 their plan evaporated as one funding proposal after another collapsed and rumours of corruption proliferated. By 2004 the Galeri Nasional had become just a space for hire, and an expensive one by Indonesian standards.

The second *CP Biennale* was held in the Bank Indonesia museum building. When they closed the *Biennale*, Jim Supangkat and Tjieran Djie declared they were concerned about protecting the artworks and the historic Bank Indonesia building from the threats of the demonstrators.¹⁰ The essential ingredient—government support—was lacking again and private funding and banking institutions have to take into consideration the fiscal implications of a negative response from the public. So it is likely that the closing of the *CP Biennale* was influenced by the danger that either the building or the image of the bank could be tarnished.

Another anachronism—the western model for art exhibitions—was inserted into a society without a tradition of museum attendance or impartial public debate. Asian curators on residencies in Australia remark on the public visitors to the state and federal galleries here and comment that there is no similar convention of visiting Indonesian museums.¹¹

Alison Carroll, Director of the Asialink, in commenting on the failure of Asian museums to establish their position in local cultural life, stated that the main visitors to the Museum Nasional in Jakarta are foreign. The Museum Nasional is quite different from the Galeri Nasional and houses traditional Indonesian art and crafts. Between 1997 and 2002 the number of visitors fell from some 29,000 to 8,000 per annum,¹² the drop in numbers being explained by the effect on tourism of *Krismon*, the monetary crisis, the turbulent *Reformasi* period and subsequent terrorist attacks. The statistic indicates that when the attendance of foreign visitors fell, local visitors did not improve the numbers. There are very few institutions that could be called museums for the public in Indonesia generally, let alone ones for contemporary art and it is particularly contemporary art that addresses the issues and interests of contemporary society. As Asmudjo Irianto wrote in his essay for this second *Biennale*,

*The lack of space for a contemporary art mediation in Indonesia makes the praxis and discourse of contemporary art alienated from (its) public... in Indonesian urban spaces the works displaying the latest trends from the West face a huge gap between the understanding of the specialists and that of the audience... Indonesian contemporary art (runs) the risk of becoming unfamiliar and unknown territory.*¹³

A tradition of impartial public cultural debate has not yet had a chance to fully develop in Indonesia. Until the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, freedom of speech itself was unknown—witness the experience of *Tempo* magazine. Its founding editor was the writer and poet Goenawan Mohamad—*Tempo* was described as “Indonesia’s foremost news weekly and mainstay of the nation’s intellectual life”.¹⁴ But it was closed down by the regime in 1994 for political criticism and it carried out activities in clandestine until the fall of Suharto. Javanese conventions of appropriate behaviour, avoiding confrontation and conflict, combine with Islamic conventions of propriety concerning the display of the human form. Both can collide with western conventions of secular humanism, which has separated artistic purposes from religious strictures and generally emphasises creative independence. In his statement that a discussion of urban culture could not be carried out within the framework of religious debate, Jim Supangkat appears to share this view. In a later interview Supangkat said,

I don't think that the FPI represents the majority of the Muslims, even though the principles they defend can never be denied by Muslims. But applying their protests to the field of art, protests that lie beyond the

*platform of art and the problems of the modern world, can only lead us to reaching the wrong conclusions.” He expressed the concern that Islam would be accused of opposing freedom of expression, even of opposing art, and he feared that the West could adopt such rhetoric.*¹⁵

Traditional Indonesian arts, the *Wayang*, *Gamelan* music and dance, are conducted in a very social environment hedged by conventions of practice, while much of contemporary visual art is produced in an urban environment somewhat alienated from traditional cultural pursuits. The western assumption has become established that, if necessary and to maintain integrity, a modern artist should operate independently, even outside contemporary social conventions. It was clear from the reaction of the other artists in the *CP Biennale* that they opposed censorship of art and claimed artistic freedom of expression. But in negotiating these pressures, Supangkat ended by exercising self-censorship in the face of fundamentalist opposition. This though, is not to say that freedom of expression has not collided with social and religious conventions in the west—note the reaction not only of fundamentalist Christians but the Roman Catholic Church establishment when Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* was exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria (1997). A considerable amount of public debate surrounded Serrano’s work and the event but such debate is in its infancy in Indonesia.¹⁶

Nudity is another contentious issue. In the west the Greeks established the nude as a subject of art in the fifth-century BC and the Humanist tradition continuing through the Renaissance expressed moral and religious feeling through the human, often naked, form. Despite bouts of religious iconoclasm, by the eighteenth-century a somewhat schizophrenic position had been established in art practice in relation to the nude. On the one hand the nude was an image of pleasure, but on the other it was the central subject of art through which all high-minded purposes could be expressed.¹⁷ By the twentieth-century study of the nude was central to western art training and at the same time had become commercialised on a vast scale through the media, the different approaches being generally accepted in a blending of high and low art.

When colonisation and globalisation made western culture the dominant culture, the academy tradition of the nude as a subject for fine art was introduced to Indonesia. The early modernists, many of whom studied in the Netherlands and later in America, accepted the nude as a subject for art although it was not a prominent subject in public spaces or art schools.¹⁸ Public figures who were devout Muslims collected and hung on their walls the nude paintings of Basuki Abdullah.¹⁹ Islam though, more than western Christianity, has specific interdictions concerning nudity and a very strong tradition of iconoclasm.²⁰ Covering the body, particularly in the case of women, is equated with guarding honour, maintaining personal morality and defining oneself as a Muslim.²¹ Added to what was increasingly seen as the invasion of western sexual hedonism through globalised media,²² fundamentalists could capitalise on these interdictions and focus on nudity in the visual arts as a device for fundamentalist activism.

The *CP Biennale* has not been the only example where nudity came under attack. The use of the naked body has become increasingly more common among young female artists as a means of expressing women’s issues and experience, but it is a confrontational practice and women artists have been threatened. It was believed that the youth branch of the PPP,

or Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, who were responsible for an attack on the art group Taring Padi in Yogyakarta in 2001,²³ was also responsible for threats against a young woman artist who helped organise a feminist performance piece in Malioboro Mall.²⁴ These Muslim groups were vetting art exhibitions in Yogyakarta and the gallery, Kedai Kebun in Yogyakarta, was warned it would be burned down if it continued with the exhibition of Sigit Pius in which he had depicted himself and his family nude. Again a strange compromise resulted with the works being turned to the wall, but not removed.²⁵ Even artworks with major international exposure have been the subject of Islamic censorship. The work *They Give Evidence*, by Dadang Christanto, was the centrepiece of the opening of the new Asian wing of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 2004. The installation piece had been shown in Tokyo in 1997 and in the *XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo*, Brazil in 1998. In July 2002, Dadang held a retrospective exhibition in Jakarta and exhibited these figures outside Bentara Budaya, the exhibition space of the newspaper, *Kompas*. Two days before the exhibition opened, local residents objected, saying children were playing obscenely with the figures and this was a danger to their morals.²⁶ The compromise of covering the figures in black plastic did not satisfy the local *imam* and he threatened to report *Kompas* and the exhibition to the Council of *Ulamas*, the powerful religious leaders. *Kompas* was sufficiently concerned by this that they removed the figures and stored them. The *Ulamas* can and have made rulings that accept sculpture of the human form as an ornamental artwork, not a religious idol,²⁷ but *Kompas* bowed to pressure and had the figures removed. The newspaper, though, also published articles protesting the censorship.

In the maelstrom that is daily political life in Indonesia, different forces vie with each other. On the one hand there is greater freedom of speech and more open criticism since the fall of Suharto's regime; on the other hand the increase of Islamic fundamentalism has led to both applied and self-censorship. Many commentators maintain that Indonesian society has become more Islamised since September 11th, pushed into an anti-western opposition by international polarisation. At the very least it can be said that the Indonesian public is increasingly sensitive to pressure from Islamic interests. The experience of the *CP Biennale* illustrates that cultural sensitivities need to be negotiated when a western model is applied in an Indonesian context. It is an example yet again that contemporary art is not isolated from political issues.

Notes

¹ Interview, Jim Supangkat in his home in Bandung, 24 April, 2005

² The Hong Kong based Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/links.html> posted the following definition on their website: "CP Foundation, Indonesia <http://www.cp-foundation.org>. Established in 2001 out of grave concerns about the increasing hegemony of certain trends in the world art forum, CP Foundation envisions a world art scene in which democratic principles can flourish and plurality is possible in a dynamic that is inclusive instead of exclusive. On this basis it aims to contribute to the widening of the world's art platform by bringing realities to the fore which have so far been overshadowed by the hegemony of a few." The Asia Art Archive (AAA) declares that it was initiated in 2000 in response to the increasing number of Asian contemporary art exhibitions and events worldwide. It is a non-profit research centre in Hong Kong dedicated to documenting the recent history of visual art from the region within an international context (sourced 22 November, 2005)

³ Tjijanan Djie, Foreword, CP Foundation and Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta: Interpellation, 2003: 16

⁴ http://www.hidayatullah.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2326&Itemid=1 2005/11/12

⁵ Carla Bianpoen, 'Sad, tragic demise of the CP Biennale', *The Jakarta Post*, 17 November. 2005

⁶ <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0510/02/persona/2094122.htm>, 12/11/2005

⁷ <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0509/28/utama/2085419.htm>, 12/11/2005

⁸ <http://www.antara.co.id/seenews/?id=19329>, 12/11/2005

⁹ http://www.gatra.com/2005-10-16/versi_cetak.php?id=89165, 12/11/2005

¹⁰ Carla Bianpoen, *ibid*

¹¹ Personal conversations at different times with Wulan Dirgantoro, Masters, Curatorial Practice, University of Melbourne and Rifki Effendi and Agung Hujanikajennong, Indonesian writer/curators who have held Asialink residencies in Australia

¹² Alison Carroll, 'Choppy Waters: Arts infrastructure and networks in Asia', in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Art and Social Change Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2005: 546

¹³ Asmudjo J. Irianto, 'Indonesian Urban Space and Contemporary Art', an essay for the second *CP Biennale*, http://biennale.cpartspace.com/2005/essay_ajirianto.html, 12/11/2005

¹⁴ Merle Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c.1200*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001: 399

¹⁵ Interview by Hendro Wiyanto, independent curator from Jakarta, October 11, 2005, <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2005/032/index-print.html>

¹⁶ In 1997 the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, held a retrospective exhibition of Andres Serrano, coinciding with a significant exhibition of the works of Rembrandt. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr. George Pell, was unsuccessful in obtaining an injunction to prevent the work being exhibited. Attacks were made in the gallery on the work and the Director, Dr. Timothy Potts, closed the exhibition. It was believed that, in a similar fashion to the fears Supangkat had for the artworks and the heritage Bank Indonesia building, the director feared for the significant works by Rembrandt. The event brought a storm of protest, note: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~twf/serrano.html>, and in-depth debate in Damien Casey, 'Sacrifice, Piss Christ, and liberal excess', in *Law, Text, Culture*, June 2000, <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/dacasey/Serrano.html> and its rebuttal at http://www.artsandopinion.com/2004_v3_n4/pisschrist-2.htm. Similar debate about Andres Serrano's work was held on the floor of the United States Senate; see http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_7.html

¹⁷ The reading of meaning in the nude in western art is, of course, a vast and highly contentious area, but the basic premise of its importance and the starting point of the debate has been *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art*, by Kenneth Clark, Princeton, 1956. See chapter 1, 'The Naked and the Nude'

¹⁸ Note the work *Rose in Nude*, by Sindudarsono Sudjojono (1913–1985), the artist considered to be the founder of Indonesian Modernism. Illustrated in *Perjalanan seni rupa Indonesia: dari zaman prasejarah hingga masa kini – Streams of Indonesian Art: from pre-historic to contemporary*, Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS, 1991: 107

¹⁹ See the art collections of (President) Sukarno (1901–70) and (statesman and nationalist political leader) Adam Malik (1917–84)

²⁰ The Qu'ran 24:31, 32 states "Say to the believing men that they restrain their looks and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. And say to the believing women that they restrain their looks and guard their private parts."

²¹ In Indonesia many of these interdictions are promulgated by fatwa. See M.B. (Barry) Hooker, *Indonesian Islam: Social Change Through Contemporary Fatwa*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003: 130–134

²² Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000: 104

²³ Heidi Arbuckle email, 23 February, 2001, circulated through the internet. Arbuckle was living and working with the group at the time

²⁴ Interview, Lenny Ratnasari, 4 June, 2002

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ F. X. Harsono, 'Dadang Christanto's Fine Art Exhibition, Proving That Violence Still Occurs', *Kompas*, 14 July, 2002

²⁷ Buya Hamka, a former chairman of the Council of *Ulamas* made such a ruling. See Susilo Hartono Yusuf, 'Artist Relives 1965 Tragedy, May Riots', *The Jakarta Post*, 9 July, 2002