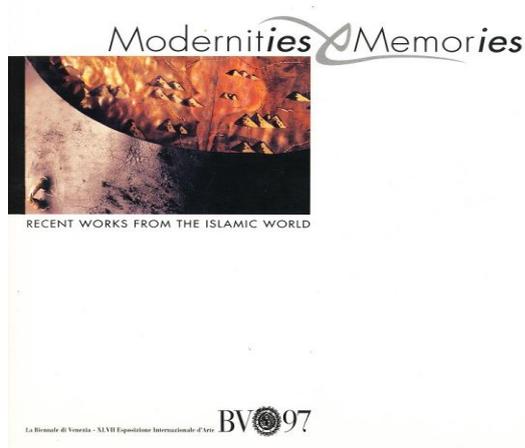


## A Satellite Exhibition during the Venice Biennale in 1997:

### *Modernities and Memories – recent works from the Islamic world*

It is quite remarkable what books you can find by Googling. Considering my current reports about Indonesia's participation in the Venice Biennale, I was interested in the earlier international exhibitions that included Indonesian artists. In particular I sought information about the satellite exhibition in Venice funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1997, titled *Modernities and Memories – recent works from the Islamic world*. Lo, I have found and purchased a copy of the now 17 year old catalogue.



This exhibition is significant because it provides an opportunity to consider issues of globalisation. Here, though, these issues are compounded by the qualification of 'Islamic world'. Are there fundamental similarities in art that calls itself 'from the Islamic world'? Were these works brought together in a commonality of religious belief? What is the significance of the fact that so many of the artists had either studied or worked in western countries? And does it take finance from the first world to mount an exhibition of art in Venice from what were then considered third world countries?

Catalogue cover for *Modernities & Memories –recent works from the Islamic World*

The exhibition was shown at the Zenobio Institute, Dosoduro, during the Venice Biennale, June 15 –November 9, 1997 with funding provided mainly by the Rockefeller Foundation. The selection process was the result of curatorial collaboration rather than the connoisseurship of a single curator and as a result, curatorial meetings were held in Paris, Istanbul, Jakarta, New York and Venice. Representatives from Egypt and Pakistan were also included. It is doubtful whether any of the participating countries could have individually initiated or afforded these exhibition processes: so-called third world countries do not have funding and infrastructure for the arts on the scale the Rockefeller Foundation was able to provide. Often a comparable tradition of support for the visual arts doesn't even exist, even if there is a willingness to enter the international dialogue. It was also noted that other Islamic countries were absent: Iran, Iraq, Palestine, the Gulf States and Yemen among them. These were at the time considered centres of Islamic fundamentalism and difficult for an American institution to approach, so from the very start the concept of an 'Islamic world' was questionable.

After Venice the exhibition travelled to Turkey where it was mounted in at the Dolmabahçe Cultural Centre in Istanbul from October 6 – 30, supported by Bilgi University in collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation. Istanbul was perceived as a geographical convergence point for western and non-western artists and intellectuals and clearly the Turkish arts organizations saw themselves in this role. In fact the Istanbul exhibition provoked more reviews and debate than the exhibition in Venice.

The editor of the catalogue for the exhibition was Hasan-Uddin Khan, an architect and academic originally from Pakistan then based in USA. His essay, *Pluralistic Dialogues, Identity, Representation and Crossing Boundaries*, was succinct and clear, unlike the usual grand language of many exhibition introductions and statements of mission. He stated that the exhibition aimed to express the 'plurality of Islamic cultures in contrast to a monolithic perception that lumps Islamic cultures together in opposition to 'Western democratic values and even modernity'. Four years later the demolition of the twin towers in New York drove a wedge between so-called western and Islamic values, reinforcing the very perceptions this exhibition strove to counter.

The artists listed on the back of the catalogue:

## Modernities & Memories



Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Pakistan*  
 Anusapati, *Indonesia*  
 Sylvat Aziz, *Pakistan/Canada*  
 Farid Belkahlia, *Morocco*  
 Inci Eviner, *Turkey*  
 Serhat Kiraz, *Turkey*  
 Abdoulaye Konaté, *Mali*  
 Rachid Koraïchi, *Algeria*  
 Hassan Musa, *Sudan/France*  
 Hendrawan Riyanto, *Indonesia*  
 Setiawan Sabana, *Indonesia*  
 Adel el-Siwi, *Egypt*  
 Zulkifli Yusoff, *Malaysia*

### RECENT WORKS FROM THE ISLAMIC WORLD

exhibition show a knowledge and understanding of international art practice, both in form and content, strangely few if any are a direct expression of religious belief. The common dominator was the knowledge of western art practices - so some fundamental questions arise that are probably unanswerable. Are there aspects of modern art that are alien to traditional Islamic practice?

With these questions in mind, my focus was, as always, on the Indonesian participation in the exhibition.

The Rockefeller Foundation was the initiator and provided the main funding, but additional support was provided by the Jakarta Foundation for the Arts and Afrique en Creations, Paris, along with six Turkish insurance and re-insurance companies and Instituto Artigianelli, Venice. The Indonesian curatorial representatives were Pia Alisiahbana, publisher of the *Femina* group of magazines and Toeti Heraty Noerhadi, director of *Cemara 6* art gallery, professor, philosopher and poet. Both were board members of the Jakarta Foundation for the Arts. A.D. Pirous, artist, curator and a professor at *ITB*, was also a curatorial advisor; a role he had long held in relation to Indonesian publically sanctioned art.

These curatorial delegates and the artists they selected, Anusapati, Hendrawan Riyanto and Setiawan Sabana, represented at that time a more conventional and conservative aspect of modern Indonesian art. The international selection committee for the exhibition were working with institutional representatives in Indonesia while more innovative, radical and activist

Hasan-Uddin Khan referred to the influence of the modern movement and the experience of independence and nationalism being a common denominator of the cultures represented in the exhibition. Many artists became involved in these events and became observers of their societies through their work. As Hasan-Uddin Khan wrote, they were simultaneously players from within and critics from without.

But increasing globalisation in the visual arts created a pressure for uniformity: that is, it seemed art must conform to certain criteria to be exhibited internationally. Interestingly this also resulted in a backlash, a searching for a local identity. Yet while all the works in this

artists functioned outside these institutions and often rejected them. The Suharto regime was collapsing, there was economic chaos and rioting, and yet none of the Indonesian works selected for this exhibition reflect any of the social and political pressures that were erupting throughout Indonesia at the time.

The three artists chosen were remarkably similar in content as is indicated by their artist's statements and the catalogue entries written by A.D. Pirous. Their artwork was strongly influenced by the modern movement, with an emphasis on formal elements and medium over content. All three artists had studied overseas, in Anusapati's case, the Pratt Institute NY, Hendrawan in Japan and Setiawan as artist in residence at the Victorian College of the Arts, Australia and in the Northern Illinois University. All held positions in either *ISI* or *ITB*, the two main art academies in Yogyakarta and Bandung respectively, and they were members of an art establishment that came under increasing criticism from alternative artists and the younger generation. These three artists represented a safe choice. There was no questioning of the social and political conditions in Indonesia; nothing that could reflect badly on the Suharto regime. The closest they came to social commentary were references to environmental concerns.



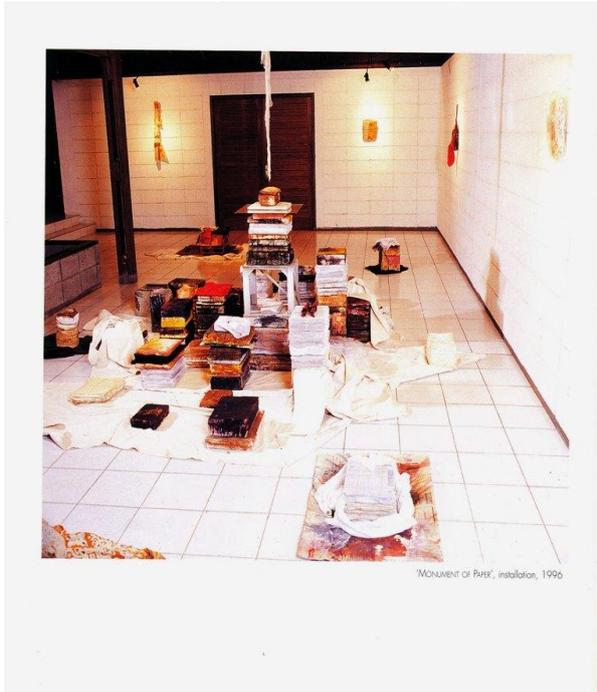
**Anusapati's** five works were collectively titled *Dialogues with the Past*. They were wooden sculptures that referenced objects from traditional Javanese villages, tools, toys or containers increasingly being replaced by modern industrially made equipment. They reflected the simplicity of village life in the past, translating functional objects into aesthetically pleasing forms. In his artist's statement, Anusapati speaks of a relationship with nature: 'The trees used to be our brothers, as we are the children of mother nature'; but there is no reference to any other spiritual, let alone Islamic, perspective.

Anusapati, *Object 8*, 1997

The ceramic works of **Hendrawan Riyanto** referred to clay as a fundamental medium of life. He writes, 'Human beings should love this natural subject, since they all will become earth / clay themselves in the end. His installation titled *Inner Mothers* had a 'mother' form as a centerpiece with smaller 'child' pieces of roughly fired clay. The intention was to related motherhood to the environment through the symbolic use of clay.

Hendrawan Riyanto, *Inner Mothers*, Installation 1996





**Setiawan Sabana's *Monument of Paper*** was an installation of piles of waste paper. According to Setiawan, paper is a stage of civilization that was preceded by the ages of stone and bronze and is now being replaced by computers. The contribution of paper to mankind should therefore be commemorated. The piles of found objects and rubbish are barely transformed. They are in their natural state with less attempt than the other two artists to transform the materials into aesthetically pleasing objects. These forms of installation art are more familiar to a western art audience than to an Indonesian one.

Setiawan Sabana, *Monument of Paper*, installation, 1996

The pluralism that Hasan-Uddin Khan writes of is very evident in Indonesian culture where Islam has been historically layered with Hindu, Buddhist and Animistic practices. A certain sense of this is expressed in the artists' intentions, but the works themselves are a product of westernised art. There is no direct reference to Islam and in fact Islamic references are rare in Indonesian visual art. In his own work, A.D. Pirous has used Islamic calligraphy and texts, but for this exhibition he is a curatorial advisor, not a participant. Placed alongside the work of other artists from the 'Islamic world', rather than a commonality of Islamic culture or spirituality between them, we see the commonality of modern western art techniques.

President Suharto's downfall in 1997 after thirty years of his repressive regime marked great social and political change in Indonesia, yet none of this was reflected in the works chosen for this exhibition. Later the work of Indonesian artists participating in the Venice Biennale and its satellite exhibitions made stronger statements of identity and addressed local issues. Indonesian art was moving away from the forms and content of modern art and becoming part of globalised contemporary art, and in this sense the exhibition marks a turning point.