

ARTISTS AND THE STATE:

THE CONFIGURATION OF POLITICAL ART IN INDONESIA

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Some Concepts

The New Order under President Suharto has proven through its long history of around 24 years that we have become a hegemonic² state.

The tendency in hegemonic states is for the ruling class to protect their position through domination that has within it ideological domination and forced political desires. In the context of culture states like these are nearly always trying to define their society's culture. The definition of culture occurs through routes that are integrally associated with power, and hence these routes become the "state" itself, and are realised through various forms of power.

These routes include forms of ritual (and the state itself is ritual) and I believe that these rituals become the pivot, the engine, the nucleus of the New Order political system. In these rituals the New Order disseminates its political discourse that in turn creates loyalty to the state³.

On the other hand the arena for ritual is an arena for negotiation between society and the state. From Gramsci's perspective the ruling class is able to implement its power if its ideology is able to serve and provide a place for culture and class values that are in opposition to it, because the hegemonic process is continuous it requires an arena for negotiation. In this matter negotiation is asymmetrical, because the dominant state ideology has authority over symbolic means of production. Because negotiation is more of an intellectual discourse, within the negotiation there are all sorts of relationships. However, the inclinations of these relationships always define the culture of a society that is controlled within bourgeois ideology.

In spite of the New Order's position as a hegemonic state that bases its power in ritual, I believe that (to borrow Leach's term) "the grammar of ritual action," which Leach describes as if there is no room for the creation of oppositional consciousness, is not always able to find space to implement its domination. On the basis of this theoretical conviction I believe that under the hegemonic state there are people who are able to find space to create oppositional consciousness through praxis.

Related to this theoretical framework, I am going to try to explain the position of art and artists in Indonesia in relation to the New Order state, and how among them there are those who are able to find space that has yet to be filled by the grammar of ritual action. The art and artists that I am going to discuss within this position are banner art, Bagong Kussudiardjo, Djoko Pekik and Semsar Siahaan. I will locate them in the context of the secular ritual of the state, so that the artistic values of their art are visible.

Benjamin (1969) says that in the beginning an art work lives through ritual, firstly as magic, then as religion. So from this, the unique values of an authentic artwork are based on ritual, as a place for original values.⁵ Because of this ritual will be the focus of the analysis in my writing.

Political Attitudes Behind Art Works

Baliho Art, which began to "intensify" around the end of the 1980s, enlivens several main streets in Yogyakarta. In front of the artists' building, Senisono, and on the corner of the central post office, as well as around the bridge famously known as the *kreteg kewek* in Yogyakarta, are all strategic places used for hanging banners. Not only are these places close to intersections, but the topics addressed in the banners are within the contexts and activities of state ritual, those being the General Offensive, October 1, 17 August, Elections and various other secular rituals.

Every road-user that crosses the banner streets will be sure to encounter several paintings featured on the banners, especially if they stop at a red light. At that point people who see the painted objects will not be thinking in a static way, so it would be impossible to consider the paintings and the series of words all together. Often people consider the elements of the banner one by one, and of course this takes time, so it can be done to fill in time whilst waiting at the red light. In turn, when people begin to be able to undertake an analysis, their ideological awareness that the state⁶ exists in the banners is just so. The presence of the state is more at a symbolic level (imagined) and it often

emerges through attention to the series of words on the banner, for instance as occurred on the banner in front of the Senisono building (in July 1992) when two banners were hung. The first banner was associated with the Yogyakarta Arts Festival IV, and support for the Visit Asean Year 1992, and the second was themed around Indonesian Independence, containing a message about national unity. Meanwhile, on the corner of the central post office a banner saying that "Yogyakarta Is A Comfortable Place". All these slogans have state contexts.

The Banner-hanging fever that officials call "city beautification," had by the end of the 1980s acquired a basis in tourist development. The topic of tourism then became a ritual from which emerged slogans. In this case artists were pulled into a tourism discourse, which then absorbed their orientation into economic discourse. As occurred in the 1960s, when Indonesia held the Asia Sports Festival, many artists were involved in designing hotel interiors and monuments.

Banners in the context of the state become an arena for the display of a miniature state, or, the banners depict monuments to the state. This reality reminds me of the miniature Indonesia that was built in the 1970s in Jakarta, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII: Mini Beautiful Indonesia Park), where the president's wife played out her intentions, which were ever inconsistent. The banner as a monument is a kind of conventional iconography that used the past to express the victory of modernity, even though it was actually no more than the nostalgic glow of the past.

Issues from the banners are also themed around the traditional, as in the TMII. The promotion of traditional characteristics seems to be trying to show Indonesian culture as "friendly" "*adiluhung*" (high and perfect). However, what actually occurs is not the beautification of the city, but rather a declining modernity that implements lessons in economics through tourism (which is regarded as modern).

In this matter "money" and the state become central discussions, thus the banner

becomes a meeting place for the state, artists, and money. This complexity later manifests changes to priorities from artistic themes to economic themes, to state themes, and from all of these emerges the theme of popularity. The connection between art, money and the state is a hegemonic cultural process. This reality in turn further strengthens the dominance of the state over the people, and the strength of the state is actually built through the understanding of the state as the source of legitimation. Through this understanding the people actually lose their energy and are weakened when they unite with the state. This occurs because they have served a class that has been subordinated, and also destroyed their culture. This destruction is accompanied by mystification of the bourgeois ideology, so that the state can become an icon. This process of iconisation was earlier offered to artists themselves; that is to people who attach themselves to the state as masters of symbolic means of production.

The presence of the state is actually very important for artists. Firstly because the state legitimises meaning, and that legitimacy is in accordance with the discourse that positions the state at the top of the hierarchy. Artists like Bagong Kussudiardjo tend to create popularity for their art by seeking legitimacy from the state rather than through the enhancement of their art work.

Bagong's search for legitimacy has actually caused his art work to go through an involution, meaning that the development of the artistic movements have shown no meaningful change, and what has occurred is actually a complication of those movements. This may have happened because Bagong has become too busy with his interests in state rituals that must be repeatedly performed.

His shrewdness in attaching himself to the state has made him an artist who is called on by the state for its own interests.

Hence his popularity is indicated by the frequency that he appears in events like the birthday of the city, or in particular troops. Bagong's participation in state rituals

further the myth that the state is strong. The display of his art, which is always associated with history from the Majapahit era up to the New Order, is a medium for a process of mystification of state ideology. The history displayed through the symbols of dance and colourful costumes further enriches the fantasy that the major state is a hegemonic state, a state that is able to manipulate traditional symbols to legitimise its greatness, which is actually more the greatness of the past than it is of the present.

Bagong Kussudiardjo, who has an art studio in Bantul, teaches students who are also quite oriented to the state. Or in other words, the state has become a compulsory centre of reference. The process of referencing the centre is executed through extended socialising, especially by involving themselves in the rituals of the state.

Apart from this there is also the creation of art works that are state themed. This is where Bagong Kussudiardjo becomes a medium for the state in maintaining, institutionalising and perpetuating power through continuous manipulation of symbols. There is also cooptation, undermining, weakening and also the weakening of potential, conducted by the state. In this context, what is later bandaged with this involution emerges as active compliance with the state as the moral, political and ideological leader.⁸

This is vastly different to the work of Djoko Pekik, who always takes up the theme of the people. This theme is an all-encompassing obsession, colouring and spreading extraordinarily through his perspective, which is the struggle for the fate of the common people. He is fully aware that the political reality he faces is like a brick wall, thick and strong. Because of this his struggle must continue not through depicting violence, but through paintings that are bound by purity of perspective. Djoko Pekik says that he only wants to contribute something, no matter how small, to painting in Indonesia.⁹ Djoko Pekik's art work cannot not only be valued for its beauty. In the sociological and political context, the beauty of art

works is not the most important aspect, but rather it is the contents and meaning of a painting itself that is most significant.

The contents of Djoko Pekik's paintings have the capacity to capture the imagination of the viewer and then tie those imaginings to the historical developments that are the background to the painting.¹¹ In spite of this Djoko Pekik's works do not present the historical context explicitly, unlike Bagong Kussudiardjo, although the viewer feels as if they are intensely engaged with the painting and involved in the colourfully realistic history of the nation's growth.

In this matter Djoko Pekik's expressive composition of colour and line is able to convey symbolic messages that touch the emotion of the viewer. That is the essence of his artwork.¹² This differs from Bagong's dances, which in fact accentuate historicity, although behind that historicity there is no ability to invite people's imaginings to become involved in the meaning of the artwork itself. This reaction usually occurs because the history being presented through Bagong Kussudiardjo's work is an artificial history. Because of this the art work doesn't have an energy that is capable of attaining the deep emotional engagement of the crowd.

The inability of Bagong Kussudiardjo is often caused by the artificiality of its 'colours', so that things are not realistic in terms of the history that took place. In simple language, the presence of the political state that desires to manipulate the symbols within Bagong's art does not express the aspirations of the people in a deep and realistic way, but rather expresses the aspirations of the ruling class. This does not occur when viewers observe Djoko's paintings, because of this his paintings become more realistic than painting itself.

Djoko Pekik-Semsar Siahaan : Political Language in Art Work

The dimension of the state (in the definition that is explained above) in Djoko Pekik's paintings is not as clear as in Bagong Kussudiardjo's work. This is because Djoko Pekik's paintings are more counter-hegemonic and also counter-discourse (in this art works are a political attitude to praxis from the artist) in facing the state. Meanwhile Bagong Kussudiardjo's works are exalted by the state. Thus the presence of the state in Bagong's work is concrete, whilst in Djoko

Pekik's paintings it appears as implicit.

The explicit presence of the state is outside of the paintings, precisely in the personal relationship between Djoko Pekik himself and the state's routes. However, Djoko Pekik's popularity has been much bridged by the state, and he is aware of this.¹³

The implicit presence of the state in Djoko Pekik's paintings is visible from the "language" in his paintings.

Although on an analytical level Djoko Pekik's paintings are counter-hegemonic and counter-discourse, in reality he says that his paintings are not oppositional. He considers his works to be part of his obsessive struggle for the welfare of the Indonesian people. This struggle is packaged with art in its "pure" sense, while the criticisms that he expresses are merely one of his obsessions that has "mbrojol" (slipped out of his grasp) just like that. He also says that he never paints people protesting, like Semsar Siahaan does.¹⁴

Djoko Pekik is genuinely never far from his Javanese-ness, and also the state is also ever-present in his imagination. His language background (High Javanese, Formal Javanese and informal) and his experience in jail is also very influential on his ideology, which is then also reflected in his paintings. The implicit nature emerges because the praxis is counter-discourse and counter-hegemony, which challenges Javanese concepts of hierarchy.

His painting actually combines the three levels of Javanese language. This is because of his background, using informal language as his mother tongue.¹⁵ Meanwhile he has attempted to package his paintings with High Javanese (which is not his mother tongue), although because informal Javanese is dominant in his mind he was unable to prevent the informality emerging, slipping in between the High Javanese, in his paintings. Consequently his paintings reflect all three levels of Javanese language simultaneously.

As in his painting titled 'Woman Coolie,' a painting that depicts a female coolie in Beringharjo. In this painting the facial expression, the body and the clothing of the coolie appear as informal, meaning the expression of suffering is presented quite frankly. However, the relationship between the women with the red car that comprises the background is depicted as veiled (High Javanese influence). So people may not immediately understand that the through this

painting Djoko Pekik wants to describe social inequality.

It is different with Semsar Siahaan, as a Batak (from Sumatra) whose language background is not as hierarchical as Javanese. He is by nature frank, his opposition is far easier to grasp in comparison to Djoko Pekik.¹⁶ For instance, Semsar's painting titled 'Passenger'.¹⁷ He describes the oppression of the poor. This oppression is painted through images of a rich man wearing a stylish Western Jacket, fat, short and cavalier, with a face worried by suffering. Meanwhile behind him, the military is beginning to take up arms, and beside the passenger a half naked woman lies exposed, groping at the passenger's chest. The broader background illustrates the suffering of the people who lie sprawled out and being stamped on, beneath a banner on which is written "Return our Land."

Semsar Siahaan's paintings have no hint of hierarchy, in fact from these paintings he challenged the hierarchy (in this sense what is under attack is not the Javanese, but rather it is Javanese itself that is his target). This can be read from the passenger who is wearing a batik cloth with the *parang rusak* motif, which is usually worn by Javanese nobility.¹⁸ Apart from this challenges are also directed at the state system, particularly the military and also Golkar (the ruling political party).¹⁹

In the context of the state and Javanese hierarchy, Semsar Siahaan's background becomes quite important.

Semsar is a Batak (Sumatran) and the son of a military man from the revolutionary era, and was taught by his father to face anything with bravery and speak honestly. Meanwhile his experience being raised in Yugoslavia and attending art school in San Francisco socialised him into a relatively egalitarian Western lifestyle.²⁰ This experience was clearly very influential on Semsar's ideology. His consciousness of freedom of thought was completely unhindered by the discourse of Javanese hierarchy that had already disseminated to all corners of Indonesia. He even invited other artists to leave behind their romantic attitudes to poverty. The phrase romanticisation itself seems to refer to the concept of Javanese hierarchy that he opposes through his paintings, to the point that he says that this will bring a spirit of renewal to humanist art.²¹

Semsar's ideological attitude is also evident from his paintings, which always try to contrast the "people's resistance" to state rituals. This contrast is evident in

the object of his paintings, which always present demonstrations, expressions of the people's anger, the shackling of the people and many other expressions that are contrasted to the smiles of the elite authorities over the suffering of the people. This is different to Djoko Pekik's contrasts between the people as the object with the authorities very blurry (in accordance with the ideology that Djoko Pekik embraces, which is reflected in his painting 'Woman Coolie').

Semsar Siahaan's painting has a direct emotional impact on the viewer, and people will be immediately aware that there is an inequality in this socio-political realism. However, the consciousness that emerged directly gives the viewer almost no chance to consider how the reality of history has played out.

This is different Djoko Pekik's paintings, which are able to carry many questions. From behind these questions what emerges is actually more capable of deepening our oppositional consciousness, in a more tactical way. Semsar Siahaan's paintings can only be understood as opposition towards the dominant ideology. The emotional reaction occurs because the discourse that dominates that system's concepts is the Javanese hierarchy, and this is the barrier that Semsar has to face.

Epilogue

Artists like Djoko Pekik and Semsar Siahaan are people who can reproduce oppositional consciousness. They are able to find space that is not dominated by the grammar of ritual action through different methods. The difference between their reproductions of oppositional consciousness is strongly influenced by the historical experiences behind them. Djoko Pekik, as a strong Javanese who experienced five years in jail, and then continued in house arrest for another six years, has formed a particular character. He is still consistent with his struggle to defend the common people of which he is a part.

While Semsar Siahaan has not had such bitter experiences, he is far more capable of finding space to reproduce resistance. His ability to find the space to take a radical oppositional stance has brought him to the realisation that hierarchy is shackling the Indonesian people.

Djoko Pekik and Semsar's practices of reproducing oppositional consciousness can be assured of encountering many difficulties, because artists like Bagong Kussudiardjo, and the banner artists, are much greater in number. They have far more

capacity to manipulate state symbols for their own interests. This is because of their proximity to the state, so that legitimacy (which is the energy of the symbolic system) for their manipulation of symbols is easy to attain.

Looking at the above configuration then, it seems that art is a battlefield for symbols. And this battlefield later provides a discourse for the configuration of the culture of political art itself. The tension within this is more of a tug-of-war around meaning in the struggle to define the reality of art.

Footnotes

1. Paper for the Binal Art Exhibition Seminar, 27 July – 4 August 1992 in Yogyakarta.
2. "Hegemony" in its use here is as understood in Gramscian terminology. See Gramsci 1987:245-246 Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Noare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds) London, Lawrence and Wishart
3. See Kertzer (1988), Ritual, Politics and Power, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. See also Mandayat (1992) The Rite of Tujuhbelasan (unpublished) Seminar Paper at the Southeast Asian Research Circle, SEAP Cornell University.
4. See Leach, Edmund (1954) Political Systems of Highland Burma, London: Athlone Press.
5. See Benjamin, Walter (1969:223-224), Illuminations, New York: Schocken Books
6. "State" in this sense is not only a concrete form but also an imagined object or part of a symbolic system of meaning. See Anderson (1991) Imagined Communities, London-NewYork: Verso
7. See Anderson (1990:175-178) Language and Power, Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia
8. The active compliance that is associated with artistic involution can be compared to the active compliance of farmers with the Dutch colonists, which endured through to the subsequent regime. See Geerts (1983) Agricultural Involvement: the process of ecological change in Indonesia. Jakarta Bharata Karya Aksara
9. Personal interview 18 July 1992. The same matter can be observed in the writing of Wright, Astri (1991:411-413) Soul, Spirit and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters, Cornell University, PhD Dissertation
10. Gramsci says that "beauty" but more determined by the specificity of the contexts that was able to attract the hearts of the masses. Beauty itself is not important. What is needed is moral and intellectual ke..... that is elaborated and forms the complete expression of the internal aspirations of society, and that is what is called people-nation in particular phase of the history of development. See Salamini, Leonardo (1981:231-212) The Sociology of Political Praxis, an Introduction to Gramsci's Theory, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
11. Ibid, Wright (1991:411) says that Djoko Pekik's paintings are able to master visual thinking, and put into it emotive reactions and then complete these with questions
12. See Djoko Pekik's painting titled 'My Family'