

Exhibition of Contemporary Art from the Non-Aligned Nations: Seeking a Southern Perspective?

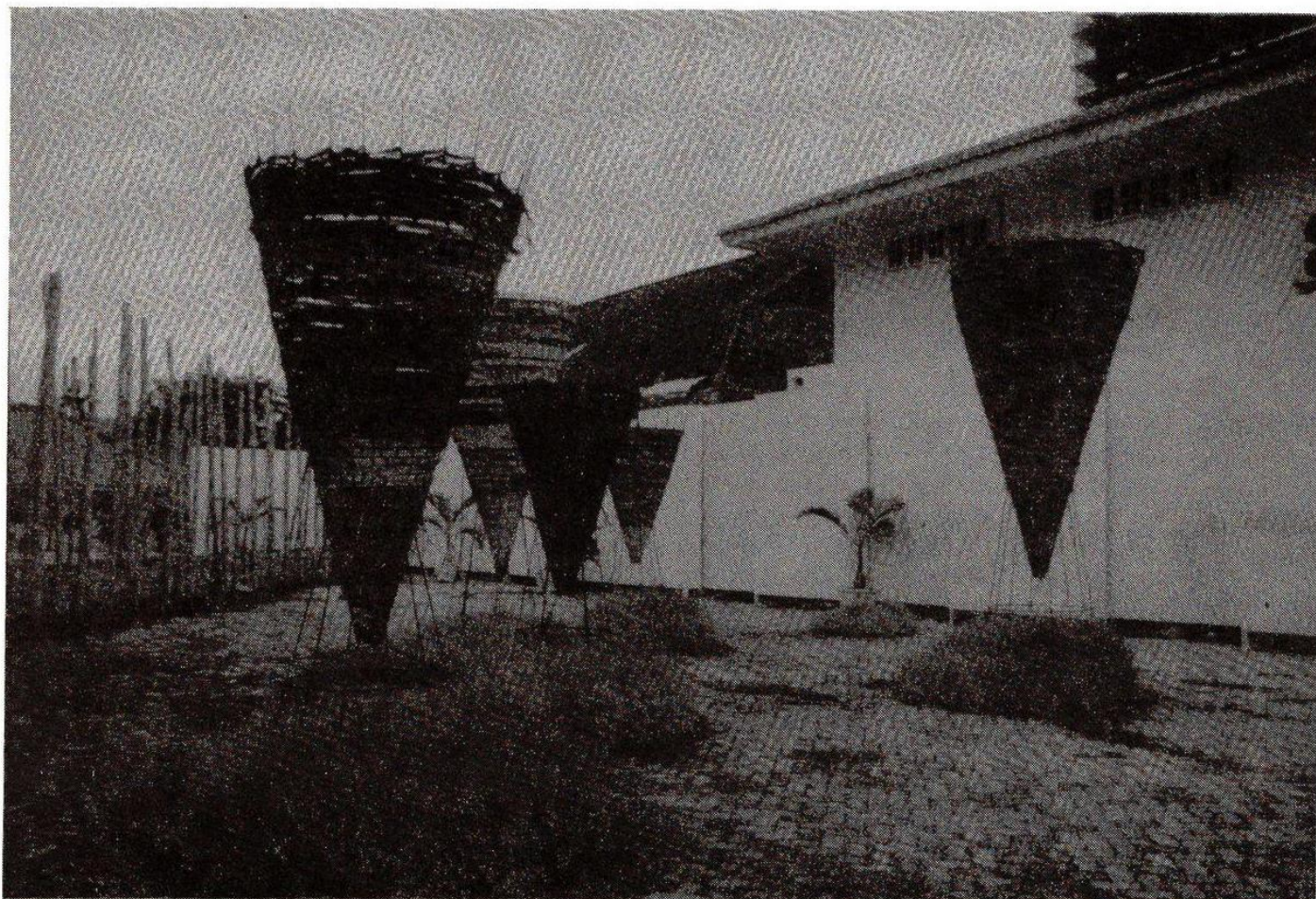
Asmudjo J. Irianto

The International Exhibition of Visual Art from the Non-Aligned Movement (GNB Exhibition) has finished, so what significance can we garner about art from the South from this major art event? Are there new theories and understandings that can be developed through this exhibition? The scope of participating nations and the curatorial premise makes this event the first exhibition of its kind to be held, although some questions have arisen about the principles of holding an exhibition like this. Regardless of this, the exhibition must be seen as one beneficial to the art world in the South, especially Indonesia. For Indonesia, this exhibition can be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the situation of art in Indonesia. In other words, the GNB Exhibition is more meaningful – for us – if we use it as a way to understand the situation in Indonesia itself. This is based on the fact that the initiative for the GNB Exhibition came from Indonesia, as the leader of the Non-Aligned Nations, which means that Indonesia is the most appreciative of the context of the exhibition's presentation, and that it is Indonesia that has the most interest in attaining what it has aspired to.

A large exhibition that comprises many participating nations could certainly take place without seeking and proposing new interpretations of what has occurred in the realms of those nations. However it seems that in the GNB Exhibition, The International Curatorial Board – which consisted of well-known curators from several Non-Aligned nations – were keen to find new ways of reading the situation of art in Non-Aligned nations, which were called Southern Nations.¹ It is easy to understand that this enthusiasm for throwing new ideas out there emerged in association with the size of the exhibition.² Perhaps it would be more surprising if a large exhibition that involved 42 participating nations and several well-known curators did not give birth to new thinking. But on the other hand, we also immediately feel the difficulty that emerged from efforts to find a “connecting thread” in the art of so many Non-Aligned nations. It might be ‘suspected’ that seeking a parallel spirit from so many nations – which are so culturally different from each other – could only be achieved if the similarities are seen through the most basic elements of visual art. The consequence may well be – because of this simplicity – that

nothing special is possessed by the Southern nations.

From the introduction to the catalogue we know that the selection of work was made by a national curator for each participating country. After the works were collected, the International Curatorial Board formulated the presentation of these works.³ The international curators sorted through the collected works, and as a result, organised them into five thematic categories which were purported as the basis of the creation of artwork in the South. This curatorial system cannot be faulted, although the understandings within these thematic categories is not really anything new.⁴ Sadly the notes provided by the International Curatorial Board to indicate the theoretical basis seemed too concise, and thus gave rise to many “misinterpretations.”⁵ Actually what brought up most debate was not the theme of the categories, but rather the theoretical premise expressed by the International Curatorial Board regarding the basis of the GNB Exhibition. One which gave rise to many misinterpretations was the use of the expression “North-South,” which is unusual in the scope of art.



"Cooking Vessels from the South"

Installation, 4 X 9 m2

Krisna Murti

Indonesia

It was said that the goal of the GNB Exhibition was to seek a basis for observations of contemporary art through the "North-South" framework.⁶ The question is, if the Southern nations each have their own "concept" within the scope of visual art, must it be seen through the framework of the North-South? In what context does the North emerge? Isn't it this that brings up suspicion that the North-South concept is no more than a synonym for the dichotomous West-East? This perspective is evident from the spirit of the International Curatorial Board's introduction and description of the categories for the exhibition. The international curators enthusiastically compiled

a formulation around Southern art which indicated how it differs from Northern art.

We would do well to understand that the theoretical basis developed by the International Curatorial Board was deliberately truncated to invite theoretical discussion in relation to the situation of contemporary art in the South.⁷

The positive angle to this is that the theories that were thrown about seemed to prompt us to take a reflective attitude to contemporary Southern art, especially Indonesian art. Perhaps we have grown complacent about the penetration of Western art, which includes modern art and contemporary Western art, consequently we have forgotten to examine our own art. Or perhaps we are already addicted to

the principles of art that come from the west, so that the parameters for evaluating our art are often taken from Western art discourse.

So there is a paradox emerging from the of the GNB Exhibition, which states that the curatorial premise does not implement standards from the normative frameworks of the North (sadly it not said what this normative framework from the North is, although it is accepted as an absolute within international art exhibitions).⁸ On the other hand, the basis for the claim that the GNB Exhibition premise does not use these Northern dominated international standards is clearly explicated. Which is actually more important: to indicate the Southern reality, or merely to present an exhibition that is “set up” to discard the Northern normative framework (whilst still paying attention to it as material with which to contest that the South is indeed different). What if reality shows that the South is actually influenced by the North? And it seems that we do acknowledge a strong influence from the North, even to this day. Besides this it is stated that the selection of work was completely given over to each national curator, so then what happens if the work exhibited is indeed work that is developed based on standards from the North?

What should be ascertained in international contemporary art – especially that from the South – is not who holds the hegemony, not who is the ‘most’, but rather recognition that there are many options. In contemporary art, artists are free to look to the past, to the present, to the future, to utilise their own strengths, to exploit and borrow from other sources. The reality we encounter is that there are many choices in contemporary art. Isn’t it so that in the “post-modern era” there is no longer a singular truth consequently? Pluralism is the answer to the current situation.

There should no longer be issues about North-South, nor should efforts to find a Southern perspective become a question. Because we believe that the situation of art in the South is plural.

THE THINKING THAT CRYSTALISES THE SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE

In the effort to read the theoretical basis developed by the International Curatorial Board to formulate Southern art, a simplistic impression is unavoidable. This seems to be a dilemma for faced by the International Curatorial Team, a desire to provide simple and easily understandable thinking for a situation that is actually very complex and uncertain. Furthermore in formulating the basis for this crystallisation of the South there is always an association with the contemporary art of the North.⁹ Speaking of the art of the North without providing limitations on scope or time opens up the possibility of getting lost, because the area under discussion is so broad.

The Term North-South and its Implications

The first tangible new issue is the use of the term North-South, which is described as the basic framework for observing contemporary art.¹⁰ Unfortunately there is no further explanation about their understanding of this North-South framework. Consequently, many of the critical reviews in the mass media have interpreted the term North-South as a replacement term for “West-East”. In an interview with Asikin in *Media Indonesia* (Sunday 14 May 1995) Jim Supangkat explained that the term North-South is understood differently to the “West-East” and its dichotomous implications. Of course both critics and the exhibition organisers can maintain their separate rhetoric in the search for the truth, and its easy to guess that each side has their own basis for their arguments.

Seeing what was written in the introduction and exhibition description in the catalogues (as one of the official materials that can be examined as a foundation for the International Curatorial Board’s thinking), it does indeed open itself up to misinterpretation. In his interview with Asikin, Jim Supangkat explained that the concept of North-South began from efforts to equalise the economic order of the (wealthy) Northern nations

and the (poor) Southern nations. In other words this concept indicates a dialogical character between the North and the South. This is certainly different from the dichotomous West-East term, and includes a more limited area (the East is often associated with the countries of the Asian continent). Besides this, the phrase West East is more often used in a cultural context. So the context behind the use of the North-South is different to West-East. However the opinion that equates the North to the West must also be accepted, because the reality is it refers to the same countries. So in this writing the terms North and West represent the same ideas, and in further discussion could be used interchangeably. But I will tend to use the phrase “West,” because in its association with art and culture there is already a custom of referring to the countries of the North as the “West.”

In the aforementioned interview, the phrase North-South is in fact proposed as an antidote to the dichotomous phrase West-East. Unfortunately in the description of the thematic categories, the international curators sharply differentiate between the South and the North in the same way (see the category explanations). In other words the emergence of the phrase North-South in this exhibition begins with dichotomous nuances.

The first question: is it appropriate to apply an expression associated with economics to the context of visual art? As Jim Supangkat states, this phrase refers to economic dialogue between the “developed countries” (North) with “underdeveloped countries” (South). Of course this dialogue is accompanied by the implementation of agreements that tie these two sides together in the field of economic relationships. Although it must also be acknowledged that so far the nations of the North have continued to put pressure on the South for their own profit. There is even an impression that the nations of the North see the progress of

Southern countries as a threat to the North’s world hegemony.

What kind of “dialogue” does the range of Southern art want to achieve in relation to the North? There are a number of difficulties with the use of the terminology in the field of art: firstly, in the spectrum of economic order the term North-South indicates that the North is strong and powerful, whilst the South is weak and dependent of the North. This means that the analogy of this situation is also relevant if the North-South framework is used in the art context. It is an implicit acknowledgement that contemporary art in the South is inferior to contemporary art in the North. If the reality of the North-South economic order can be seen as an effort to create equality, then what is the reality in terms of art within this North-South framework? Is there inequality between art in the North and the South? This question can only emerge if there is a two way flow, mutual necessity between art in both of these poles, like trading commodities. Of course the suspicion arises that we have adapted Western culture, not that we are also asking them to adapt Eastern culture. It is a logical consequence that inequality in this cultural situation should occur, that being the domination of Western culture; we cannot deny West has achieved progress first. In the West, in the era of modernism that still continues, there is an exclusion of all forms of artistic activity that are explained as “not art” (observe the dichotomy between “art” and “craft” in the West). This shows that the exclusion of modern art from the South, as distinct from international modernism, is not a geographical problem, or related to the origins of the artist, but rather because they believe that the principles of modernism must be maintained. It is only natural that those who are recorded as representative of international modernism are in the West, because that is where the birth and then the elaboration of the theory and praxis of modernism occurred.



"Watching TV," 1988
Acrylic on canvas
146 x 146
Heri Dono
Indonesia

If the South is not recorded in this way this is also natural, because it must be acknowledged that the South has indeed adapted and made adjustments, so that the principles of modernism are no longer appropriate. Now it seems that the South's consciousness of the different values of its "modern art" with modernism in the mainstream, are in fact promoted as a bargaining power. In fact since the era of modernism, they (the North) have not been concerned by national boundaries. If only the North is recorded as the location of

"mainstream" activity at the time, then that is actually a reflection of reality. In accordance with the "principles" of modernism and the "avant garde," what can and should be recorded as part of modern art constitutes only a few things that reveal linear development. Meanwhile that which doesn't take up the principles of the "avant garde" is, of course, unrecorded, much less regarded as the epigone of "Northern" modernism.

At this point modernism is no longer valid in the North, but essentially the principles of “fine art” still continue. This gives rise to a paradox in Western contemporary art. The death of modernism seems as though it should change the situation, and anyone should be able to make a name for themselves as a representative of the “postmodern.” Anyone can be involved and there is no longer any single authority. This means that geographical boundaries like “North-South” are less and less important. The situation is in “free-fall”. But as in a free-for-all, the strong will win. Jim Supangkat’s statement in the daily paper *Republika* on 6 August is true, the strength of the “North” in forming and influencing contemporary world art has not changed. This means that the West continues to exploit the facilities that modernism has developed, and the process of excluding various artistic actions continues.

The elitist situation in contemporary art is maintained. In his book *The End of Art Theory* Victor Burgin described a paradox in art in the “postmodern” era. The death of modernism should have resulted in the erasure of belief that the artist is a genius; there should no longer be any artistic hierarchies, like “pure art” positioned above “the art of the masses” or “high art” in opposition to “low art”. But in reality the situation is hardly different to the modernist period.¹¹

The West still dominates the distribution of various concepts of aesthetics that have developed within “postmodern” pluralism. The difference in the current situation is that the West has slightly opened the door for artists from the periphery (= outside the West) to play too, so long as they understand the rules. This situation is evident from the involvement of contemporary artists from the South in Northern art shows, and also from influx of contemporary art activity into Southern nations. The explanation of this situation indicates the increasing difficulty of summoning the Southern perspective in the North-South context, because the North itself is in a state of “chaos.” To make things more difficult, even in this state of chaos the North’s influence on the South is still strong.

These are the doubts I have regarding the curatorial premise: what interests are served by

the use of the term North-South, as a perspective for looking at the reality of contemporary art in the South? Is it not the case that all of the participating countries are Southern states? In other words these hosts have no interests in the situation of countries in the North, except to provide the basis for a new understandings with which critics from the North can look at art from the South, with the assumption that the curatorial premise is primarily aimed at an explanation for audiences from the North.

In many ways the international curatorial team’s categorisations relate to realities that exist in the South. The situation in the South is a mix between the influence of the West and local situations. In other words, without having to return it the North-South relationship, that reality exists and continues in the South. It would be more meaningful to seek the identity of the South in relation to the presence of the artists in their own society, rather than trying to equate them with the development of art in the North. To draw a line of difference with the North, the International Curatorial Board stated:

The development of individualism that continues in the North has meant that contemporary art there has attained a very subjective expression, whilst in the South the expression through contemporary art must compromise with collectivity.¹²

What is meant by “collectivity” here is less than clear. As a question: What kind of collectivity exists in contemporary art in Indonesia? Is this collectivity concerned with the consensus within the “art world” or also involved in the consensus in broader society?¹³ Because if we speak of collective values this means that we are speaking about things that constrain artists. In fact, even modernist artists are greatly constrained by collective values, and this is indicated by Victor Burgin:

The putative ‘freedom’ of the artist is no more or less constrained than that of the critic. Contrary to the bland dogmas of our ‘new’ dissent-free Romanticism, the artist does not simply ‘create’ – innocently, spontaneously, naturally – like a flowering shrub which blossoms because it can do no other. The artist first of all inherits a

role handed down by a particular history, through particular institution, for or against them, the relationship to them is inescapable.¹⁴

It is difficult to build a perspective on looking at contemporary art of the South by also providing a new “view” for the North. The problem is we have been influenced by the North for too long. So what we propose as the differences with the North in fact to turn out to be similarities, and on the other hand what we regard as the same is in fact different. The identification of the South seems to be more beneficial if it begins with a reading of the existing reality, whilst also investigating the influence of the North. This should not be done with suspicion, but rather to see the art of Indonesia and the South more objectively.

No matter what, we cannot avoid the reality that there are two influences from the West that provide form to modern art in the South. As has occurred in Indonesia, these influences are: firstly, local modernity as it occurs in the nations of the South. Secondly, there is the influence of the modernism in art. Modernity in the South has been proven to take its model from the West; examples are easy to find. Because of the adaptation of the Western model, modernity in the South has also produces modern art, that differs from traditional art. Aesthetically the difference between modern art of the South and traditional art doesn't need to be seen as a different form. In fact it is somewhat difficult to see from the implications of its aesthetic idioms, because sometimes modern art of the South is heavily laden with forms that are taken from a wealth of traditions. An example from this situation is modern Balinese painting. This can be read in the introduction to “Balinese Contemporary Art Exhibition” (as an exhibition that accompanied the GNB exhibition. Based on the creation of art works in Bali, a transformation has occurred under the influence of Western artists who came to Bali (Walter Spies, Arie Smith). From this perspective it is clear that modern painters in Bali have also been directly influenced first hand by Western artists, but what is more evident is that there has been a transformation of the artist's position in society. Artists are no

longer figures that serve society and the palace in a relationship of patronage. Of course there has been a transformation of aesthetic standards, as a consequence of the individualisation of the artist. But this aesthetic individualisation still shows strong roots in traditional Balinese art.

In summary, it is that from the perspective of modernity, (a stage of change towards modern society) which is more influenced by modern Balinese artists than it is by the principles and standards of modernist aesthetics (in the form of modernist art styled). It is apparent that the transformation of traditional art in Indonesia that produces well-known individual artists has only occurred in Bali.

The second influence – which is stronger – is the influence of modern Western art on the development of modern art in Indonesia. Before going into more detail, this matter itself may have occurred because of the transformation of culture in Indonesia, in the direction of imitating Western culture (which began during the colonial period) and is more tangible in the larger cities. In other words, there has been a conducive climate for the reception and adaptation of modern Western art on Indonesian soil. The “Romanticism” that Raden Saleh brought, the “naturalism” that was esteemed by the “Beautiful Indies”, Sudjojono's “expressionism” and Bandung “cubism,” to give a few examples of the influence of Western “styles.” It is easy to guess that there would then be a “misconception” of the application of these styles; however it should be understood that that adaptation of style is not in the interests of the West. Sudjojono, who is said to have adapted the expressionist style, did not do this because he wanted to be noted as an expressionist artist from the centre of the hegemony, because of course he was not. Rather he did it in the interests of “artist-hood” that was fitting for the cultural situation in Indonesia at the time, fitting with the intensity of the use of art as tool for advocacy in support of Indonesian independence. As a consequence, the adaptation of expressionism in Indonesia will never be recognised as part of international modernism, because it occurred somewhat later and in a different spirit, and besides this the

central hegemony has no desire to record or involve the peripheral regions. But the fact that it is not recorded as a part of international modernism will never change the reality of modern art in Indonesia. Looking at Sudjojono as an example, we can draw the conclusion that it is more important to investigate an adaptation of style from the West by looking at its amalgamations, and the implication of local situations, rather than returning to the limits that are set by the hegemonic centre.

However, this adaptation to the local situation does not mean closing one's eyes to the concept of Western art (the paradigm of art in the West). By understanding Western art paradigms we have the choice and the freedom to treat the values that are valid in the west as "invalid values" or to "blend them" with local assets. Full understanding of the aesthetic standards of the West can also provide the possibility of adapting them in full, so long as it is a conscious choice.

With the enforcement of modern culture and its respect for individual values – especially in visual art – there are no stipulations for modern Indonesian artists to make works within any particular limitations. The syncretism between modern (Western) culture and local cultures, between modern Western art and traditional arts, between modern Western art and local cultural contexts has meant that Modern Indonesian art has had concepts and diversity from its beginnings. Seen from this perspective, it is futile to try and see modern Indonesian art from the parameters of Western modernism. But once again we must acknowledge that there is influence from modern Western art on modern art from the South.

The difficulty when we have to "compare" and "differentiate" modern art from the South and modernism from the West is that there are many conceptions of "Southern art" to choose from, as we have seen in Indonesia, what has been called "Indonesian modern art" does not refer to a clear paradigm that compares to what we observe in Western modern art, as an established document that is already part of the past. The basis for the aesthetic orientation of modern art in Indonesia has yet to be formulated. What the International

Curatorial Board outlined is true, art in the South represents diverse situations, and this immediately reveals the reality that Southern art that has a different orientation to Western modernism. But it doesn't mean that there are no similarities to modernism. In short modern art from the South has both different and similar principles to Western modernism.

This is the problem we encounter in our efforts to examine these differences now. To be able to see the differences objectively, an investigation of these two differentiated realities needs to be conducted. However as was mentioned earlier, in the South, for example in Indonesia, it is hard to identify the bases and values that are inherent in the reality of its modern art. Firstly, this occurs because of the lack of elaboration in modern art discourse in Indonesia. There are practically no books that comprehensively refer to the developments and values that modern art in Indonesia takes up. Secondly, there is the difficulty in building an art discourse because of the diverse situations that are included in the scope of modern Indonesian art. These two situations influence the situation of contemporary art in Indonesia, which is to say is art in Indonesia "now".

The other difficulty in comparing art from the North with that from the South currently is the reality that the North is now in a plural situation. The principles of modernism are bankrupt, meaning that in the postmodern era in the West there has occurred a "destruction" of the authority of art, because of the presence of pluralism.¹⁵ Even so it has been proven that the principles of modernism have not entirely been stripped; for some parties the "old clothes" are still worth wearing, "postmodernism" rejects modernism but it utilises the facilities that it built.¹⁶ Of course, what the interests of looking at art from the South are in the North-South perspective becomes a question, because firstly, even with the North in a plural situation similar to that of the South, this means that all possibilities are open, and it is consequently difficult to make comparisons. Secondly, if in the end of pluralism uses the "old principles" (there is a new contemporary art

hegemony = the North) then we return to the futility of offering the dissimilarity of Southern art's as a "different value" to be drawn to the attention of Northern art's scope.

Modern art in the south is always facing a situation in which its position is dilemmatic. On the one hand it wants to show its difference in an effort to be recognised as "equal", on the other hand that very difference is what has meant that art in the South has not been recorded as a part of modern international art. The cause is clear, that all styles – that have also been adapted by the South – in modernism were born in the West. Besides that, the desire to be noted as a part of

international modernism – a different modernism – actually raises questions, because now it is too late, and furthermore shouldn't we trying to understand the face of our own modern art, with the intention of better understanding the situation as it occurs in the our own locality. The most important thing is the continuous effort to record and observe what happens, so that reflections on modern Indonesian art can be more objective. Our main difficulty is in "reading" our own face, although it seems that we also have trouble "reading" the face of what is happening in the West.



Portrait of the Artist (Self Portrait)
1982
Watercolour
Semsar Siahaan
Indonesia

The simplification of what occurs in art in the North as outlined by the International Curatorial Board has invited some criticism. It must be understood that the curatorial board seems to have begun from the assumption that what has occurred in Western art is under comprehended by the “art world” in Indonesia. However, the difficulty is that this comprehension has yet to develop here, and besides this the reality is that modernism itself is not the simple homogenous structure we often suspect it to be. There is truth in the idea that modernism developed in the same spirit, a linear course in the spirit of the “avant garde,” but we must remember that modernism has been developed from the complex modern cultural situation of the West in the 20th century.¹⁷

Actually the main thing to notice is not the aesthetic concepts that modernism must bring, but rather the way that the artists locate themselves in society. The “avant garde” in modernism determines that artists no longer serve society. Artists precede society, through their art work. There are many complexities that cause artists to develop their own world. Of course this causes modern Western artists to constantly elaborate on the conception of aesthetics, for the sake of seeking new aesthetic standards. This is what brings about the birth of art styles within modernism, and the old styles are no longer valid with the birth of new styles. This also immediately explains why often in the South there is a reluctance to accept modern art works that have adapted modernist styles as part of international modernism. Of course the West only sees these styles as the epigone of the modernism that has previously emerged in the West.

Thematic Categories in the GNB Exhibition

If we look into the past, the styles that modernism gave birth to are also pluralistic (that is, in the amount of styles that emerged). Modernist styles can be categorised in two kinds of tendencies: firstly the tendency to make work in rational ways (for example cubism), and the other with an irrational approach (for instance expressionism and surrealism).¹⁹ From this we can

see that it is quite difficult and futile to compare the aesthetic tendencies of Western modernism with modern art in the South. Modernism can only be seen in its homogenous form from the perspective of the “avant garde,” which is the attitude that continuously precedes society in producing aesthetic standards. In other words, this puts the “thematic” approach that the International Curatorial Board used in a worrying position. The effort to display the “differences” between the South and the North are very obvious, whilst it has been clearly stated that the formulation of the Southern perspective need not be regarded as a challenge to the North.²⁰

Unfortunately if we investigate the description of each theme, what the International Curatorial Board reveals is an enthusiasm for building a dichotomous atmosphere with the Northern perspective, precisely by placing excessive emphasis on the Southern perspective. This gives the impression that these “themes” do not exist in the North. Of course we should be suspicious of this. That these themes are not visible in modernism is understandable; as mentioned earlier modernism has a spirit of renewal. This means that matters concerned with these themes are part of what is rejected by modernism. The exclusion that modernism performs is not only towards art from other places outside of the hegemony, but also art that is not in line with the relevant paradigms, even though exists there, it is not acknowledged as part of international modernism. In other words, comparing these themes in art from the South, with modernism that is not in its place, means that art from the North is restricted to modernism. On the other hand, if what is intended by art from the North is not modernism, then the claim that these themes belong to the South becomes even more tenuous. Say we are looking at contemporary art from the North, then the situation we are facing is not yet clear. The rejection of “modernism” that has occurred in the North has created “postmodernism” with a pluralistic situation, meaning it is not impossible that parallel situations could occur between the North and the South concerning themes presented.

Once again, it is more important to look at the context of the “existence” of artists within “their society.” What is the position of modern art in Indonesia towards its society? What is the consensus on artistic values in Indonesia? What is the influence of Western art on Indonesian art? Alongside this we must also critically observe art phenomena in the West now. With the bankruptcy of modernism, is the “avant garde” dead in the West? In what context do artists in the North present to their society? Have artists in the North returned to look at the issues of society? Are Northern artists returning to look at the achievements of past traditions? Does art in the North no longer practice exclusion towards minority artists? Or on the contrary, is elitism still present in modernism? If it seems all these things exist together, then what is the relevance of looking at the South in a way that also involves the situation of the North? Unfortunately the North-South perspective offered by the International Curatorial Board is not accompanied by an explanation that is commensurate with the situation of art in the North, remembering that the North has returned to a plurality similar to the South. This has given rise to many misinterpretations, and possibly this writing is among those misinterpretations.

Contemporary Versus Modern in the West

The term “modern art” in the West refers to modernism. In the post-modern era, the phrase “postmodern art” is rarely used directly, but is more often referred to as “contemporary art.” This does not mean that in the modernist era this phrase was not used, however it was used in a neutral way, in the sense of “current times.” Actually the understanding of the phrase “contemporary” is the same as the phrase “modern.”²¹ But these days the phrase “modern” in the West indicates an understanding of modernism, meaning it is no longer neutral. Meanwhile modernism’s period of relevance has passed, so the phrase that is most “fitting” in Western art at the moment is “contemporary art.” However this phrase is not entirely neutral either, because it also carries the

understanding of being “not modernism.” In short contemporary art refers to a plural scope of art in the West after modernism.

A paradox appears, that includes contemporary art in the West as has been previously mentioned, in which there is a tendency to reject modernism but to continue to exploit the “facilities” that modernism has developed. Although it is plural, it seems there is an indistinct elitist situation that is the same as in modernism.²² In contemporary art there is an exclusion of many of the creative processes of art. Of course the paradigm of art has changed, but it seems that the spirit of the “avant garde” is maintained. This is indicated by the frequency of “happenings,” “performance,” and “installations” in the West after modernism. Although many say that art after modernism wants to return to the community’s side, in fact, Western society does not understand “postmodern” art, at least in comparison to modernism.²³ Along with this a commodification of modernist artworks has occurred, and an abundance of writing about modern art, so that the modern art public in the West is no longer “unfamiliar” with modern art.

It must be acknowledged that with the bankruptcy of modernism and its “ivory tower” authority, art seems to have lost its power. This is shown through the openness of art to popular social issues, such as “multi-culturalism,” “gender,” “social issues,” the “rise of spiritualism,” the “periphery” and so on. So emerges a question, in connection to how contemporary artists locate themselves in connection to these issues. Or should contemporary artists always be in touch with the issues that are currently popular in society?

It is easy to guess that the “plural” characteristics of contemporary art in the West bring with them many paradoxes. For example, work made in the interests of the environment does not have the same power of advocacy as NGOs that are active in the field, for instance Greenpeace. Sometimes because of their awareness of their work as “art work”, contemporary artists attempt to package their art as actually voicing particular issues with symbolism, so that the issue taken up is difficult

for the audience to understand. On the other hand because of the burden of the “issue” they support, it becomes difficult to evaluate the aesthetic achievements. Which work can therefore be regarded as successful? That which successfully influences the masses on the relevant issue or that which offers new achievements in aesthetics? The second option clearly displays the spirit of the “avant garde.”

In reality contemporary art in the West cannot erase the elitist character of “fine art” that developed before modernism. In modernism this elitist attitude was a deliberate decision, because of the spirit of the “avant garde.” However, in contemporary Western art a confusing situation has emerged; contemporary artists want to return to serving society, but after such a long period of being left behind by modernism, the people have developed their own art in the form of mass art or popular art.²⁴ So where is the space for contemporary art to occupy? It seems to have no other choice but to occupy the space handed down to it by modernism. Contemporary art now fills famous art galleries and museums in the West, and it is contemporary art that will make itself available to commodification after Western capitalist society succeeds in commodifying modernist art works.

In fact the situation of art in the West now is influential on art in Indonesia and perhaps in the South. It is undeniable that the recent popularity of installation art in Indonesia is because of the direct influence of the situation of art in the West. This reality needn't be met with disappointment, or seen from the perspective of “right or wrong” in a black and white evaluation, because what has occurred is the logical consequence of the situation in today's world. There is a tendency, with the surge in globalism, and the hegemonic centres increasingly disseminating their influence, for the spirit of opposition to arise and point out the particular strengths that the hegemony does not have. But the reality of the spirit of “fine art” and “elitism” remains entrenched in contemporary art, both in the West and in the South.

The GNB exhibition wants to describe the face of contemporary art in the South. And the curation

of this exhibition has pretences of serving up a formula that refers to a Southern perspective on art. It is acceptable that there is an effort to locate the West as a comparison point, because the historical background shows that nearly all of the Non-Aligned nations are former Western colonies, which have experienced the intense penetration of Western culture. However it is too difficult show these similarities through contemporary art in the nations of the South. So the International Curatorial Board has pinpointed the diversity of art as the value that binds the South. To tie together that diversity, the International Curatorial Board has gone through a sorting process that has resulted in five thematic categories, which emerge as values that differ from the North. As I have said, the effort to formulate so many countries into one framework in can result in nothing other than basic principles and themes, and so they could also encompass what has occurred in the West, especially in the current plural situation. So, it is more interesting to look in detail at what has occurred in each Southern nation itself. For Indonesia it is of course most important that we look at the situation in our own place.

A GLIMPSE AT THE FACE OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN ART

The GNB International Exhibition is accompanied by the Indonesian Contemporary Art Exhibition. This exhibition aims to reveal the face of Indonesian art more broadly and reflect developments in contemporary art in Indonesia.²⁵ The introduction to the Contemporary Indonesian Art Exhibition was given by Suwarno and Sarah E. Murray. Suwarno briefly described the history of the development of modern Indonesian art up to now. Meanwhile, Sarah Murray gave a complete “lecture” on modern art and its association with modernity. It was most interesting to observe the introduction given by Sarah Murray. If we look closely at Sarah's writing it challenges somewhat the basic thinking behind the GNB International Exhibition. Hence it would be wise for us to look at Sarah's opinion.

In her introduction, Sarah described contemporary art in Indonesia as plural, no longer dominated by any particular tendencies. Contemporary Indonesian art can be represented by artists in Ancol right up to installation artists. To take this further, contemporary art in Indonesia has its roots in modern Indonesian art, which has been established and given a significant role in culture in the 1930s and 40s. Sarah then offered various possible explanations for the context in which “modern Indonesian art” could emerge at that time. She says that modern Indonesian art that developed in that era was based on various possibilities, begin with the imitation of Western art styles (Paris academicians and modernism), the introduction of new artistic idioms (canvas) and finally, the most relevant according to her, Indonesian artists break with tradition. (Note that in fact the connection to local tradition is one of the categories in the GNB Exhibition).²⁶

Sarah states that contemporary art in Indonesia is rooted in modern Indonesian art. So what has happened to modern art in Indonesia that has caused it to be replaced by contemporary art? When did modern art in Indonesia end? Or does Indonesian modern art continue to this day? What position does contemporary Indonesian art occupy in relation to its modern art?

Modern Indonesian Art Versus Contemporary Art in Indonesia

In her introduction Sarah Murray stated that there was no true “avant garde” in Indonesian art and the concept of an “avant garde” is not applicable to the conditions of art creation in Indonesia. If what she means by a “true avant garde” is the application of Western modernist styles in full, then that certainly did not occur in Indonesia. But perhaps “avant garde” mean as follows:

In art, this term was adopted to refer to artists who were constantly pushing ahead into new aesthetic, social and political territories as the vanguard of society, finding the future before anyone else had arrived....There was a blurring

of art and society in the idea, a change in aesthetic conventions.²⁷

If this is what is intended, then it may well be that this is what occurred in Indonesia, because the “avant garde” is identified by the relationship between artists and society; artists going forth to discover new aesthetic principles, which are not easily understood by society.

Sudjojono, one of the fathers of modern art in Indonesia flagged a “challenge” to the aesthetic principles of the “Beautiful Indies” and offered a new and original principle of “painting.”²⁸

If we look at it through the viewpoint of “Western” society, perhaps the “style” that Sudjojono adopted was not original. But in this context, we must consider the society and field of art that existed in Indonesia at the time. Seen from this perspective, Sudjojono was an “avant garde,” because he truly believed that his “method” of painting was the most appropriate and correct. Sudjojono represented “high art”, meaning he represented the “elitist” level at the time, and created with “freedom.”²⁹ If we compare this with the modernists from the West, Sudjojono was indeed different, because he was also an artist who adhered to socialist and nationalist principles. However the “painting method” he brought was something outside of the comprehension of Indonesian society at the time.

Actually, whether “causing trouble” was or was not the principle of the “avant garde” in Indonesia is not important. Because whether such a principle does or does not exist in Indonesian art, the reality is clear; Indonesia has a “modern” art, which differs from modernism in the West. And it is also a reality that modern art in Indonesia is diverse.

Modern art in Indonesia has from the beginning embraced diverse principles. We can see the flow on from the “Beautiful Indies” which embraced naturalism, so that it was easily accepted by lay society, and beside this there is also the “visible soul” of Sudjojono. So too in more recent times, when we have come to know Jogja and Bandung “cubism.” Sudjojono’s challenge to the “Beautiful Indies” did not mean that style was immediately abandoned. Because in Indonesia there was no

singular principle of art, and so there was no single authority, like modernism, that could be attacked. Because of this modern art continues to live in Indonesia to this day. What we call contemporary art is actually nothing more than what modern Indonesian art that has been doing on all this time. Contemporary art in Indonesia is now a plural entity, that needn't be connected one to another. That is the strength of modern or contemporary Indonesian art, which has unfortunately yet to be investigated in detail and has not been accompanied by an adequate discourse. Or, could it be that is why modern Indonesian art has lasted this long, without collapsing like Western modernism?

FOOTNOTES

- 1) See GNB Exhibition catalogue, p. 4: "Our search for a Southern perspective...", meaning that the International Curatorial Board felt that the Southern perspective had yet to be interpreted.
- 2) What is meant by my new thinking here is: the International Curatorial Boards attempts to find a curatorial system that is free from normative standards originating in the North (GNB Exhibition catalogue, p. 3)
- 3) *Op. cit.*, GNB Exhibition catalogue p. 4
- 4) From the history of Western art and the situation of Western contemporary art, we know that these themes do occur.
- 5) See Jim Supangkat's writing at this number.
- 6) See the GNB Exhibition catalogue, p. 3
- 7) Apart from the explanation of every themed category, the introduction provided for the GNB Exhibition is very short.
- 8) *Op. cit.*, GNB Exhibition catalogue
- 9) See the explanation for the category themes in the GNB Exhibition catalogue, it seems that there is an effort to distinguish contemporary Southern art diametrically from Northern contemporary art.
- 10) *Op. cit.*, GNB Exhibition catalogue
- 11) See: Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, Macmillan Education Ltd, London 1987, p. 162
- 12) *Op. cit.*, GNB Exhibition catalogue
- 13) Regarding the "art world" see Rizki Achmad in this number.
- 14) Victor Burgin, *op. cit.*, p. 158
- 15) See: Suzi Gablik, *Pluralism: The Tyranny of Freedom*, in *Has Modernism Failed?* Thames and Hudson Inc. London, 1986
- 16) See Jim Supangkat's writing in the daily newspaper *Republika* 6 August 1995. See also Victor Burgin, *op. cit.*, p. 198, stating: "The end of 'grand narratives does not mean the end of either morality or memory."
- 17) See: Nicos Stangos, *Concepts of Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p. 9. See also, Suzi Gablik, *op. cit.*, p. 20-21
- 18) See: Suzi Gablik, *op. cit.*
- 19) See: Nicos Stangos, *op. cit.*, p. 8
- 20) GNB Exhibition catalogue, p. 4
- 21) See: Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, G and C Merriam Company, Springfield, p. 245 and 729
- 22) See Jim Supangkat's writing in the daily newspaper *Republika* 6 August, 1995. He says: contemporary art in the West returns to homogeneity, and the process of exclusion and inclusion returns again.
- 23) See: Suzi Gablik, *op. cit.* p. 75
- 24) In her book *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik indirectly says that art should be re-instated into its social connection, see p. 171. But this opinion is criticised by Jill Johnstone in *Art in America*, February, 1993, p. 39-41. Johnstone says that Suzi Gablik's thinking would place the artists in the role of "social worker."
- 25) Indonesian Contemporary Art Exhibition catalogue, p. 3-4
- 26) GNB Exhibition catalogue, p. 12
- 27) *Op. cit.*, p. 24
- 28) See Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1967, p. 196
- 29) *Loc. Cit.*