

# Indonesian Contemporary Art and the Asia Pacific Era

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*At the end of the last five years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the art world in Indonesia revealed interesting events that require close study. The number of art events that have taken place across national borders, both in the name of ASEAN, the Asia Pacific, or Asia, has been increasing. These events certainly have taken place in the past, but the frequency has increased in the 90s, and it seems it will continue to increase in the future.*

At random we can point to examples like the Asean Awards 1994 and 1995, the Asean Curators Forum, the inter-Asian nation exhibitions, the 1<sup>st</sup> Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Triennial that was held in Brisbane, Australia in 1993 and again in 1996, New Art from Southeast Asia in Japan, which at the end of 1995 was also preparing a large exhibition of Asian Modernism. On a broader scale, last April Indonesia hosted an exhibition of Contemporary Art from the Non-Aligned Nations in Jakarta.

This event, I think, signifies a quite meaningful wave of change that must be understood in terms of its meaning and its tendencies. This event took place alongside a high tide in economic growth in the East and Southeast Asian regions. The shifting of economic centres to the Asia Pacific, will sooner or later encourage closer cultural interaction. The grouping of Southeast Asian nations together through ASEAN, has recently been followed by the grouping of the nations of the Asia Pacific. The free market system that will be implemented over the coming years will

certainly clarify the wave of change that is already being felt.

If indeed there is a wave of change does the use of the phrase “contemporary” behind art in the last two years also signify this change? The phrase contemporary art certainly has been known in the art world in Indonesia since the end of the 1970s, but this phrase is not as common as modern art, or is not currently as popular. Often the use of the phrase now is supported, and there is a kind of fashion for it in the art society between the ASEAN and Asia Pacific nations. The phrase has become popular because it fulfils the need for a word to replace the word “modern.” Why is the phrase modern art being avoided or distanced? This is to do with the enormous changes that have occurred in the West, which is the incessant correction and revision of the values, concepts and customs of modern art. The efforts to attack modernism in the West began in the ‘70s and peaked in the ‘80s with the emergence of alternative thinking that was called *post-modernism*.



Ivan Sagito,  
*Image on the Clothes-line II*,  
1991

One of the stylistic tendencies of the  
Yogya Surrealists at the end of the 80s  
and the beginning of the 90s

So the popularity of the phrase contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region and in other non-Western countries is a symptom of the joint fading of the dominance of modernism, which was the life-blood of modern art. Because of this we can say that the use of the phrase contemporary art recently is certainly a sign that there is change of orientation and the development of new frames of reference. These changes have not yet revealed their directions or their forms clearly. In the first phase, these changes were revealed with an attitude of cultural “opposition,” opposition to the principles of modern art, an attack on the values that were seen as having degraded and derided modern art outside the West.

So it was, that when modernism experienced its decline in the centres of its own development, Western Europe and Northern America, and presented post-modern heterogeneous conditions, the cultural conditions in non-Western nations seemed to gain their “freedom.” All this time, both in the era of colonialism, and in the period before independence, non-Western culture lived and blossomed under the “grandiose” shadows of Western culture. But now, after that which was once “great” is no longer, that which was once the “centre” is no longer, after the blurring of the line between “high art” and “low art”, the borders have also

been lost between the large and small, the centre and the periphery.

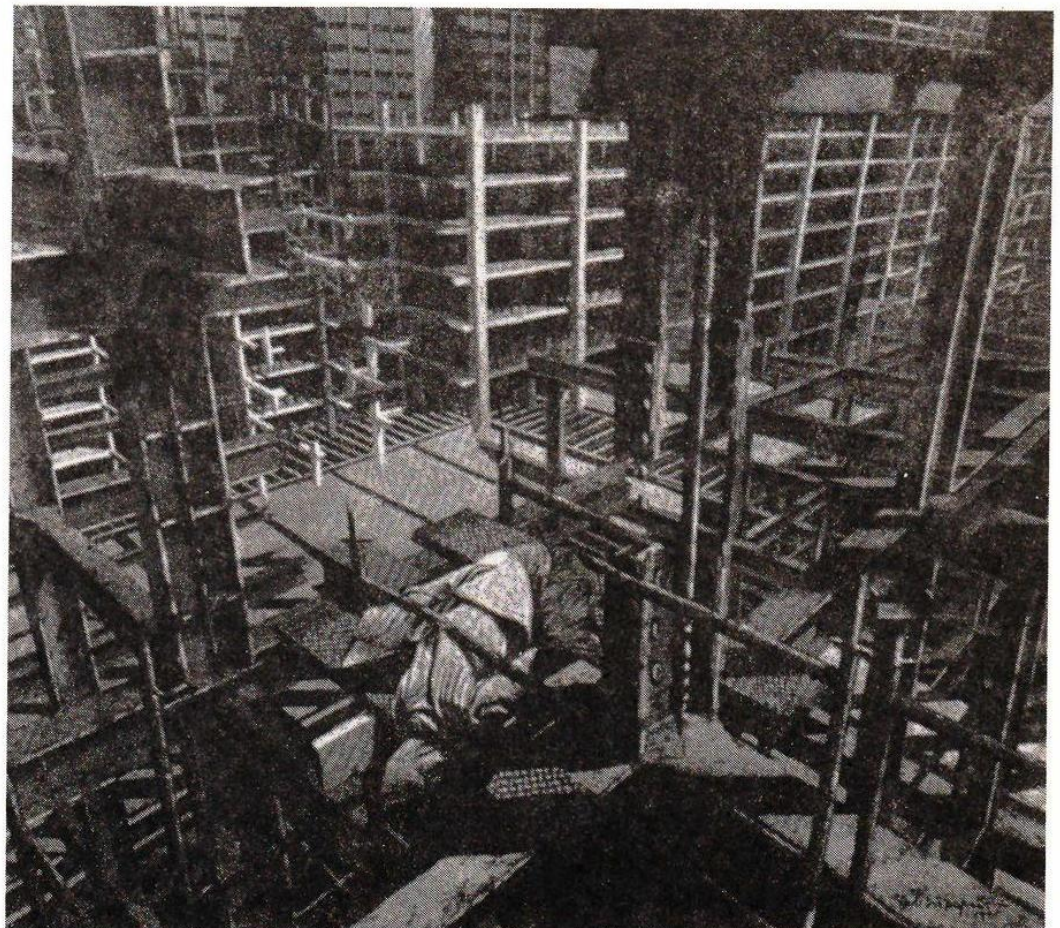
Modernism, which is “soul” of modern art, is a set of values that gave life to modern art for over a century. Its birth in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the aesthetic revolution, to which there is no comparison in the history of art. In preceding eras the change of an artistic style required longer, often over centuries. In Modern art the change of style was increasingly fast, a decade, five years or even no more that two or three years. From the time of its emergence to the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seems the dynamic of modernism was full of life: Impressionism (1874), Post-Impressionism (1886), Fauvism (1905), Expressionism (1905), Cubism (1907), Futurism (1909), Orphism (1911), Suprematism (1913), Dada (1916), De Stijl (1917), Constructivism (1920) and Surrealism (1924). The majority of changes in artistic style took place in Paris, which in the period before the Second World War was a kind of Mecca for the art world.

The life-blood of modern art was full of vitality and was the source of modernism, which in essence was faith in the independence of aesthetic values and the continuous raising of these aesthetic values. Attitudes like this then gave birth to new norms of *renewal*, *originality* and *creativity*, as norms that came to be determinants and encouragement for modern arts

life-source. Modern art demanded that the artist create renewal and originality. Imitators do not bring renewal or originality, so imitators were regarded as unimportant or non-existent. At the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s the pressure of these norms pushed artists to conduct unusual renewal, crossing boundaries of medium, exploring ideas, concepts and movements. When all of the renewal had been done, from the anti-art (Duchamp) to the art concept, artists then felt these norms to be a burden. At that time, attacks and opposition to the values of modernism began to emerge and increase in the following periods.

The breadth and influence of modern art in non-Western countries occurred along with the expansion and influence of Western culture in Asian, African and Latin American nations. In Indonesia the traces of modernist thinking can be found in the writings of Sudjojono in the period of Persagi's establishment (1938) up to the period of Japanese occupation. The concept that

art is autonomous, and that artists are innovators, is strongly reflected in Sudjojono and Affandi's writing. Meanwhile, the style of art that was developing and spreading through artists' circles was Expressionism, both for Sudjojono and Affandi who at that time were already revered by artists of their generation. This tendency did not stand alone, but rather was a broader cultural tendency, as seen in the Cultural Polemic (1935), followed by the Gelanggang Creed (1950) through to the Cultural Manifesto (1963). These three cultural pillars signified modernism's struggle to enter Indonesia. Both the Gelanggang Creed formulated by artists and cultural workers of the '45 Generation, and the Cultural Manifesto, placed faith in the universality of aesthetic values, the autonomy of art, and the individuality that brought renewal and was the primary characteristic of modernism. Another phrase used at the time was *Universal Humanism*.



Dede Eri Supria,  
*In the middle of the  
Concrete Jungle*, 1991

A member of New Art,  
who works consistently  
with urban themes.



Mochtar Apin,  
Interwined, 1987,  
An Abstract formalist  
painting from Bandung painter

In the 1950s, the growth of art academies, whose teaching systems and basic ideas revealed the influence of modernism. Both ASRI in Yogya and the Art School at ITB in Bandung, on different levels applied systems and approaches from modern education. However, compared to ASRI in Yogya, the Art School in Bandung introduced more recent art styles, in the form of Cubism, and then progressing to the Abstract Formalists. Because of this, in the '50s and '60s, artists from Bandung Art School seem to have directed the tendencies of Modern Indonesian Art. At the same time, the dominance of modernism also faced strong cultural opposition with different reference points, Social Realist Art. In the principals of Social Realism art is not autonomous, but rather an instrument to be used to enact social and political change. The teaching of art like this originates from Soviet influence,

which at that time was moving in support of the Communist Party of Indonesia.

Entering the '70s, several tendencies appeared, some of which carried on from the previous period, and some of which were new. From ASRI Yogya, the Decorative style began to blossom under the drive of Widayat and the artists of Sanggar Bambu. This leaning revealed strong formal aspects combined with elements of tradition and themes of the every-day.

For Bandung artists, Abstract art reached maturity under Ahmad Sadali, Mochtar Apin and Rita Widagdo. This was followed by propensity to include elements of Arab calligraphy for Ahmad Sadali and A.D Pirous. The integration of traditional elements occurred in the work of G. Sidharta, Haryadi Suadi and Sunaryo. Meanwhile Srihadi and Kaboel Suadi worked with the figures of dancers and the horizon in a style more expressive than Srihadi.

Combining the elements of Yogya and Bandung in the younger generation of artists emerged with the New Indonesian Art Movement, can still be explained as the most recent inclination to the process of adaptation of Western art.

Here the styles of Pop art, Neo-Dada, Optics, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Happenings, Assemblage and Photo-realism were evident. New Art's explorations were still underway in the 1980s, and reached its peak in their 1987 exhibition at TIM (Taman Ismail Marzuki Cultural Centre) following the Manifesto of New Art that emphasised and underlined their mission; criticising the concept of "High Art" and blending of different branches of art through inter-media. A number of figures established this group, who remain active in the art world today, such as Jim Supangkat, Harsono and Dede Eri Supria. The booming of world art in the couple of years around 1990, which was driven by the purchase of art works by businessmen from Japan, also spread to Indonesia. At that time galleries were growing rapidly, and collectors were actively seeking paintings. With this emerged the Surrealist style with young painters like Ivan Sagito, Effendi, Agus Kamal, Lucia Hartini and so on. The phenomena of "Surrealism" in Yogya still brings up problems for writers and curators, because if it is associated with the emergence of Surrealism in Europe in the 1920s, then its presence is really not in line with the patterns that occurred in New Art or the Bandung "School" who worked to narrow the gap between new developments in the West and in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the lively installation works of young artists in the 90s, which was in keeping with the inclinations of the "avant garde" in the Asia Pacific region and the Western world, added to the sense that the development of contemporary art in Indonesia was not being left behind the times, and was equal to other countries in the world. This problem appeared for instance in the Jakarta Art Biennale IX in 1993, where the majority of works tended to

installation and less space was given to the Yogya Surrealist painters. This happened again in a painting exhibition in the Netherlands, when this style was not included. Apart from Yogya Surrealism, young artists who appeared in the period before New Art, such as Dadang Christanto, Heri Dono, Anusupati, Nindityo Adipurnomo and Hedi Hariyanto from Yogya; Semsar Siahaan, Agus Suwage, Erwin Utoyo and Rahmayani from Jakarta; Andarmanik, Krisnamurti, Tisna Sanjaya, Hendrawan and Diyanto from Bandung; Nyoman Irawan from Bali; Iwan Koeswana and Acep Zamzam Noor from Tasikmalaya; and Asri Nugroho and Dwijo Sukatmo from Surabaya. This line of names could still be extended with many others who have shown potential as young artists in the '80s and '90s.

The problematic around Yogya Surrealism and a way of looking at it signals the direction that "contemporary art" is moving in in identifying itself. On the one hand, the rejection of Yogya Surrealism still seems to apply the basic concepts of modernism that respects only new work, and rejects the old. On the other hand, aligning "only" with *avant-garde* tendencies, in installation work, performance and so on reaffirms a commitment to the values of renewal and originality.

That from the aspect of ideas, contemporary art reveals the shape of opposition to the mainstream, might be read as a double standard. There are many discussions and seminars on modernism and the Western hegemony. For example there was the *Contemporary Art Symposium of 1994, The Potential of Asian Thought*, hosted by Japan, and the *International Contemporary Art 1995* seminar during the Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Nations Exhibition. In these ideas, the tendency to absorb the ideas of post-modernism is also strong. This is evident for instance in the use of idioms such as *plural, ethnic, multiculturalism, gender, marginal* and so on.

This inclination, I think, needs to be monitored because it is not impossible that as we



Widayat  
Sakura, 1981,  
An example of Decorative  
style work from Yogya

are freed from the dominance of modernism in art, contemporary art will enter in through the channels of post-modernism. If this is indeed the case, then contemporary art cannot simply say that it is free from the cultural hegemony of Western culture or the nations of the North, as we heard during the Contemporary Art from the Non-Aligned Nations Exhibition recently. The process of defining the direction and meaning of contemporary art today is still open. This process cannot take place by itself, separate from flow of enormous changes that is underway. The grouping of regional cultures both at the ASEAN and Asia-Pacific levels seems to attain a power that enables the emergence of art reference systems after modern art that differ from post-modernism. The process of forming the cultural region of the Asia Pacific, which has taken place alongside political and economic development,

provides awareness that contemporary art can have a role in achieving more humanistic relationships between nations in the region. Thus, art does not only show aesthetic dimensions as it did during modernism, but also has ethical, political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions.

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