

**THE VOICE OF MUTED PEOPLE**

**IN MODERN INDONESIAN ART**

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**MASTER THESIS**

**1995**

## **PLEASE NOTE**

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,  
and the best possible result has been obtained.

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## **ABSTRACT**

**THE VOICE OF MUTED PEOPLE:** This research into Indonesian Socialist-Realism Art, examines how art has shaped the political and social environments of the New Order Government. This text examines contemporary artists' attitudes toward social commitment and social commentary during the period of 1980-1995. Conflicting views of Indonesian contemporary artists were obtained from research undertaken in Indonesia during 1995. In this thesis I raise the problem that Indonesian Socialist-Realism not only a style of art for contemporary Indonesian artists, but also as a union of artists' attitude toward the society. I offer this argument to be used in understanding modern Indonesian art from "inner" point of view, and I hope it could lead to the discovery of new knowledge.



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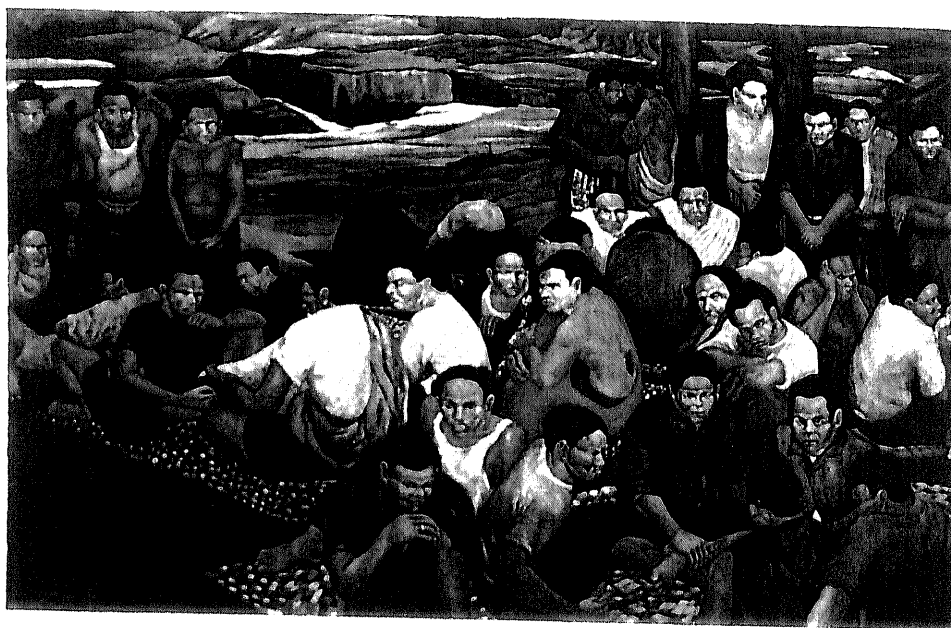
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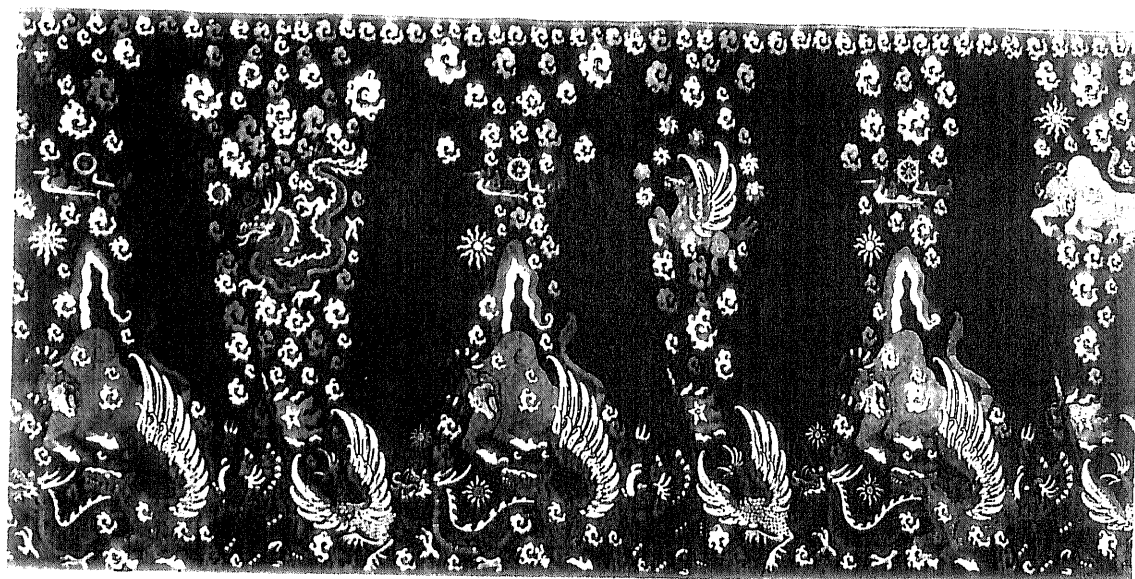
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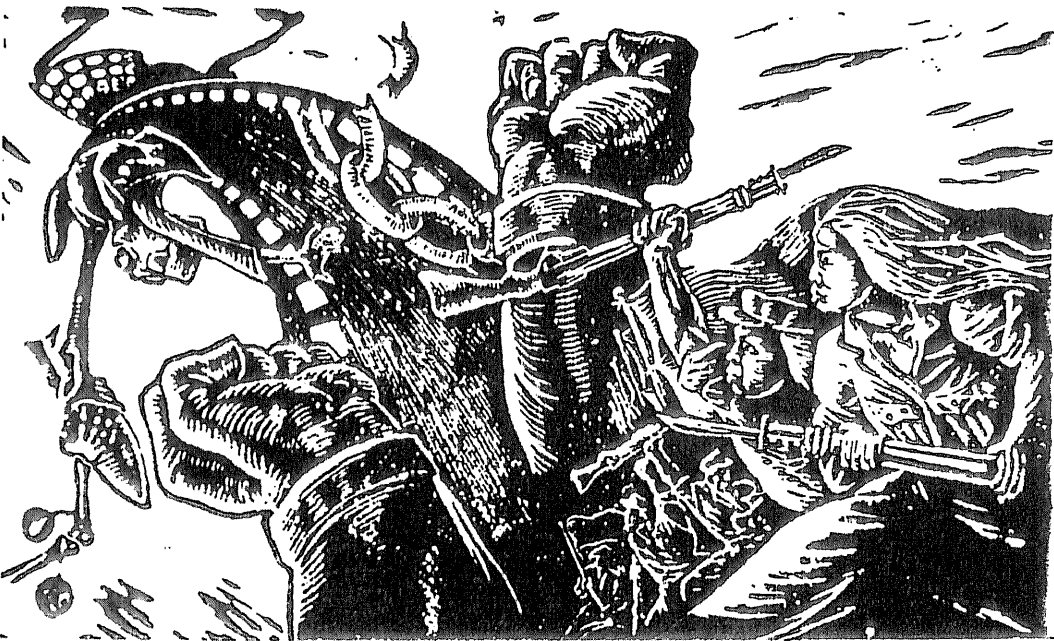


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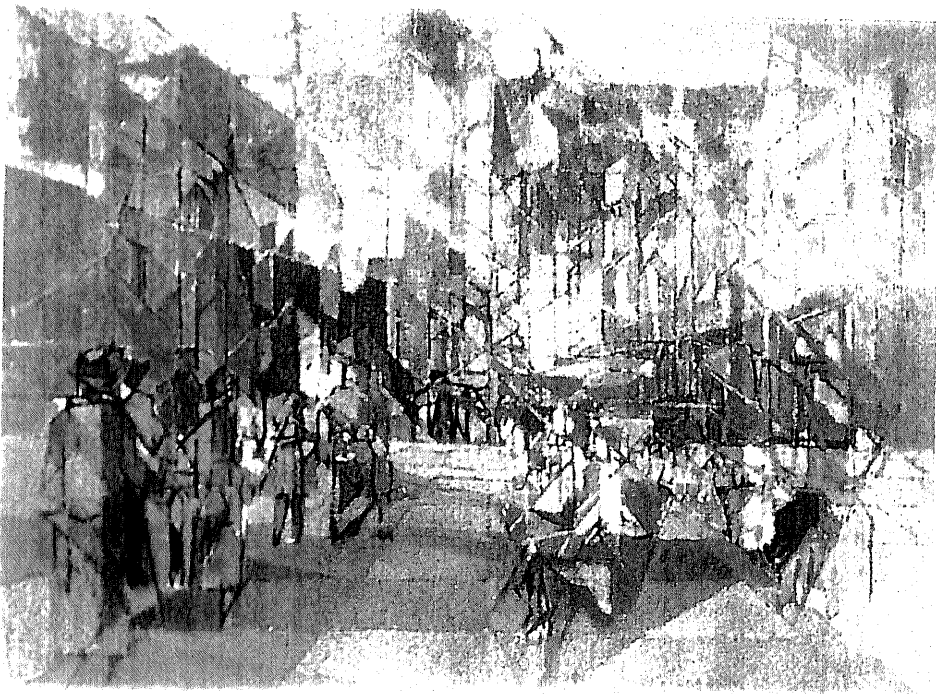


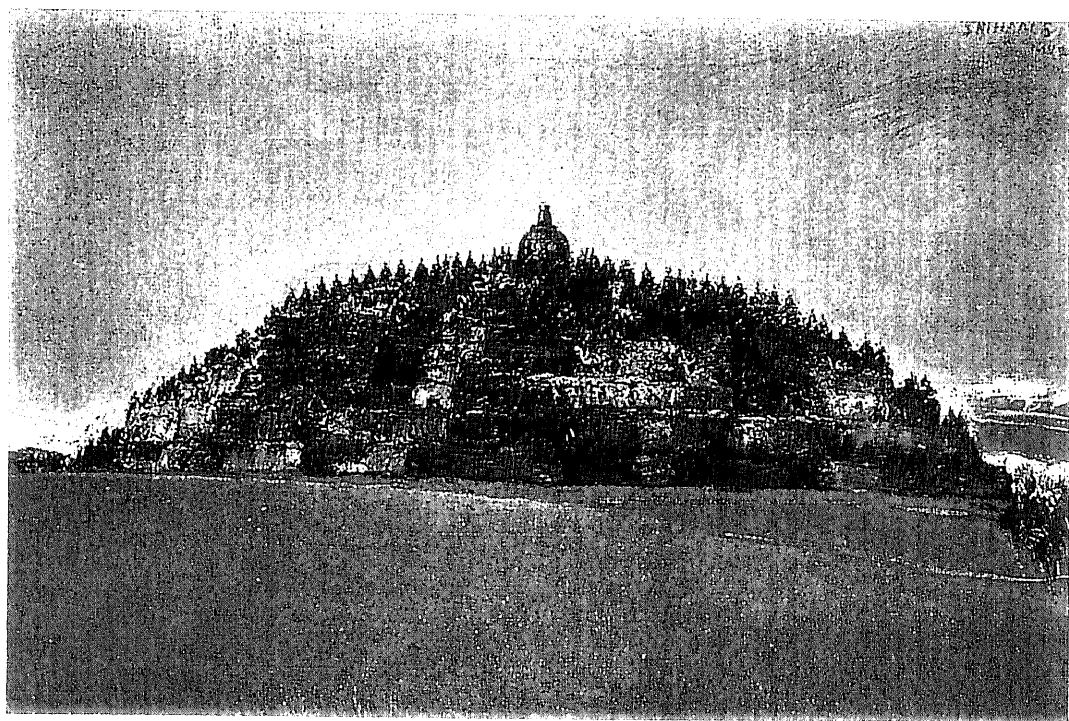




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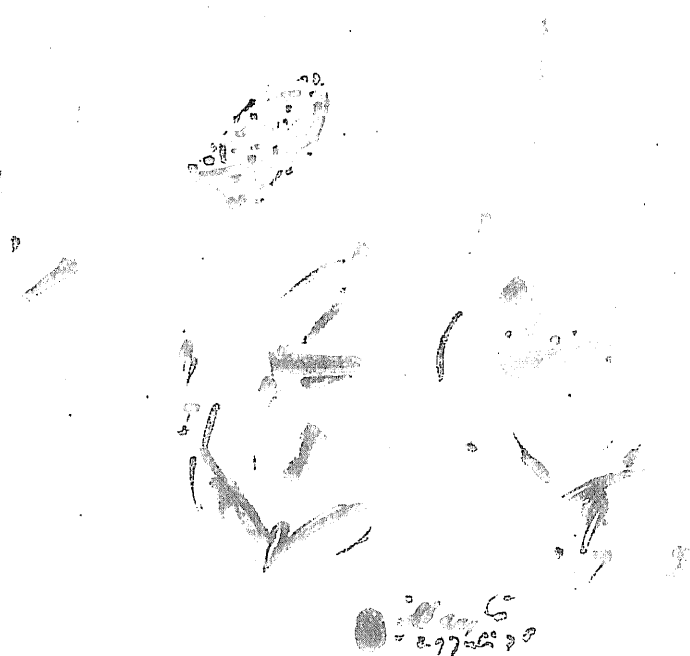
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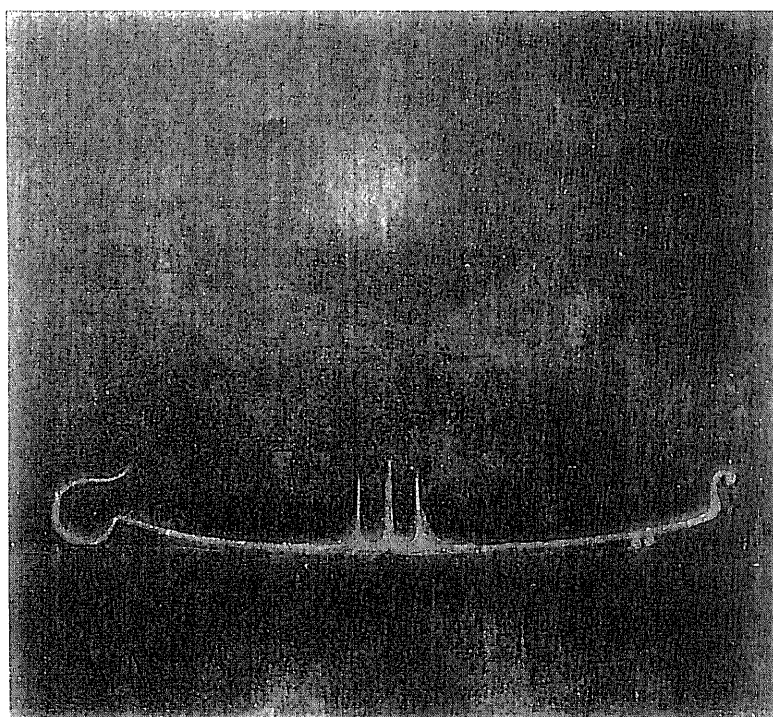
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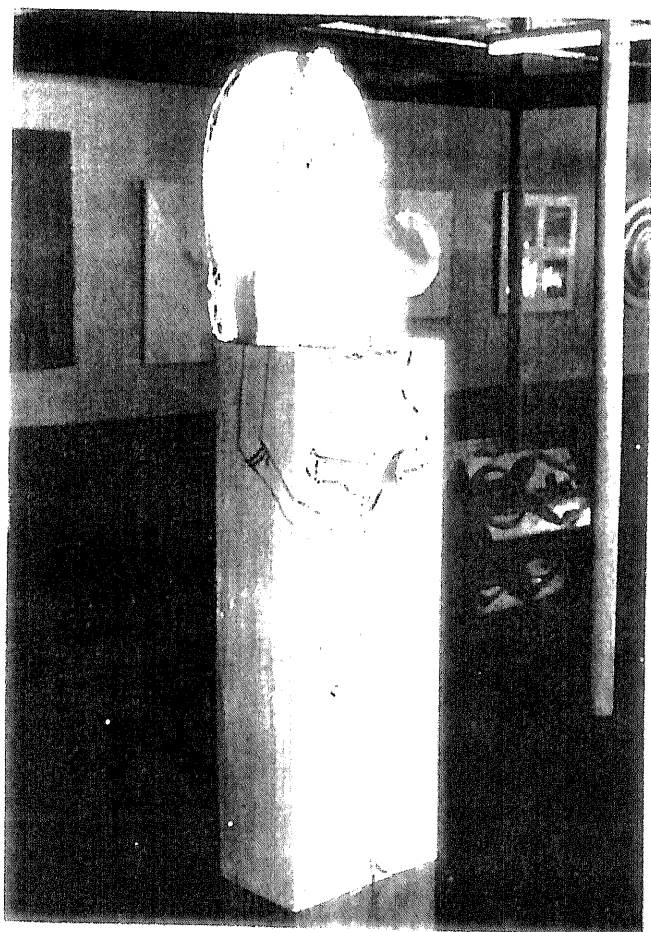
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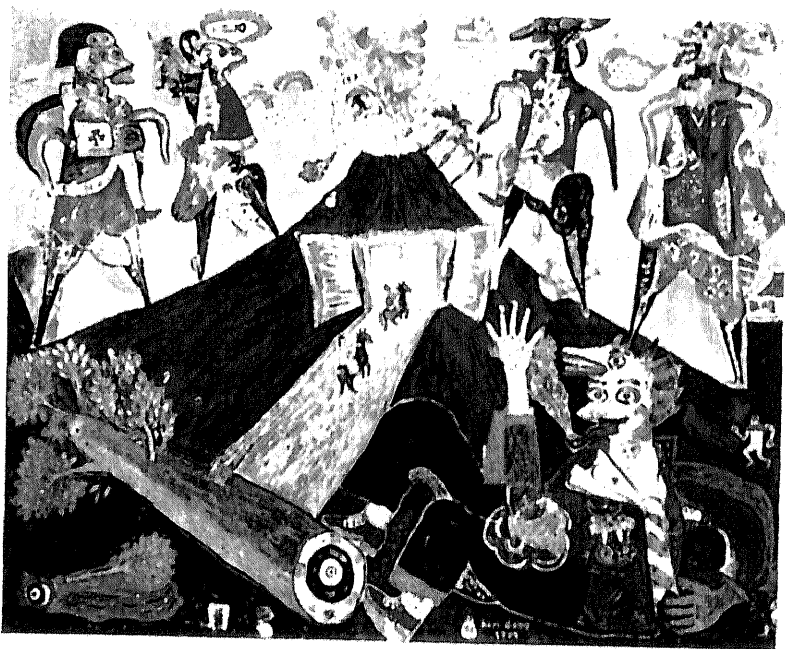
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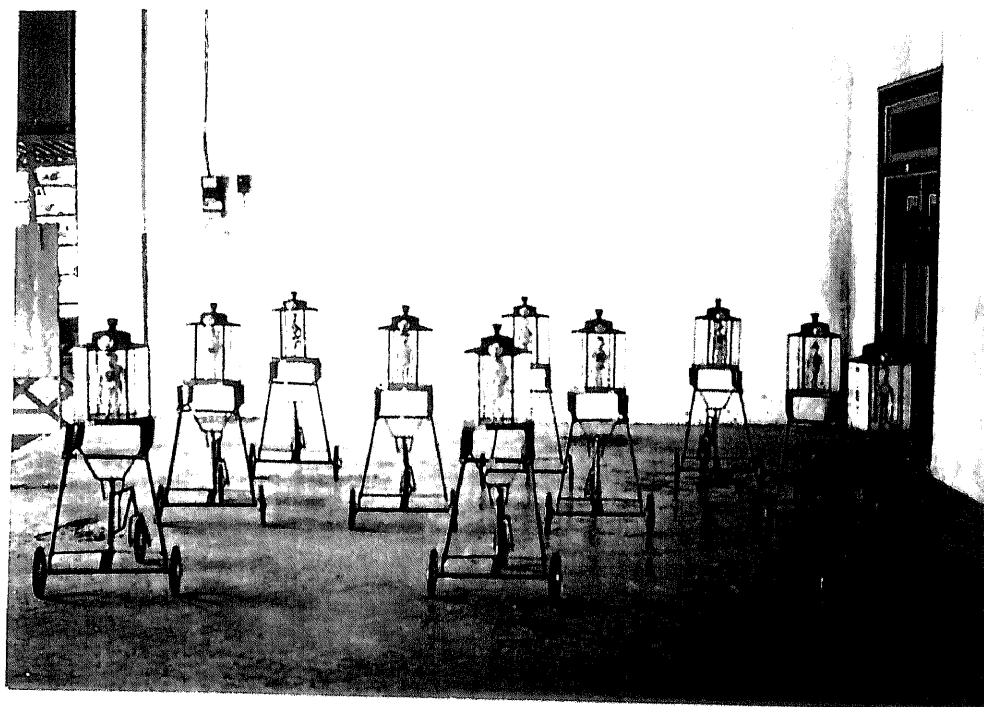


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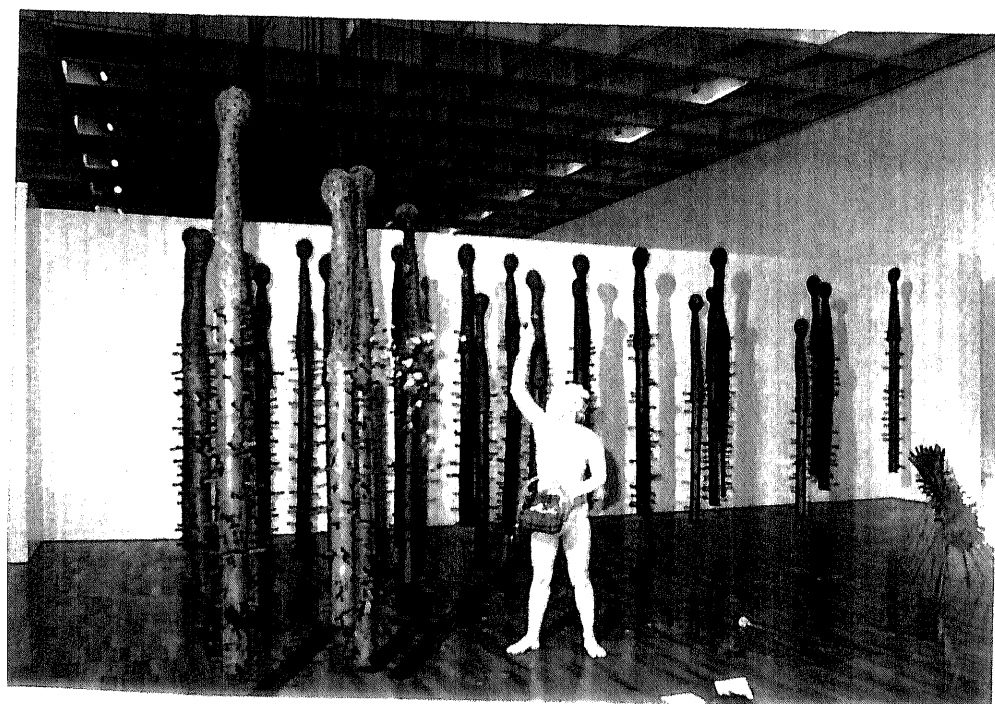


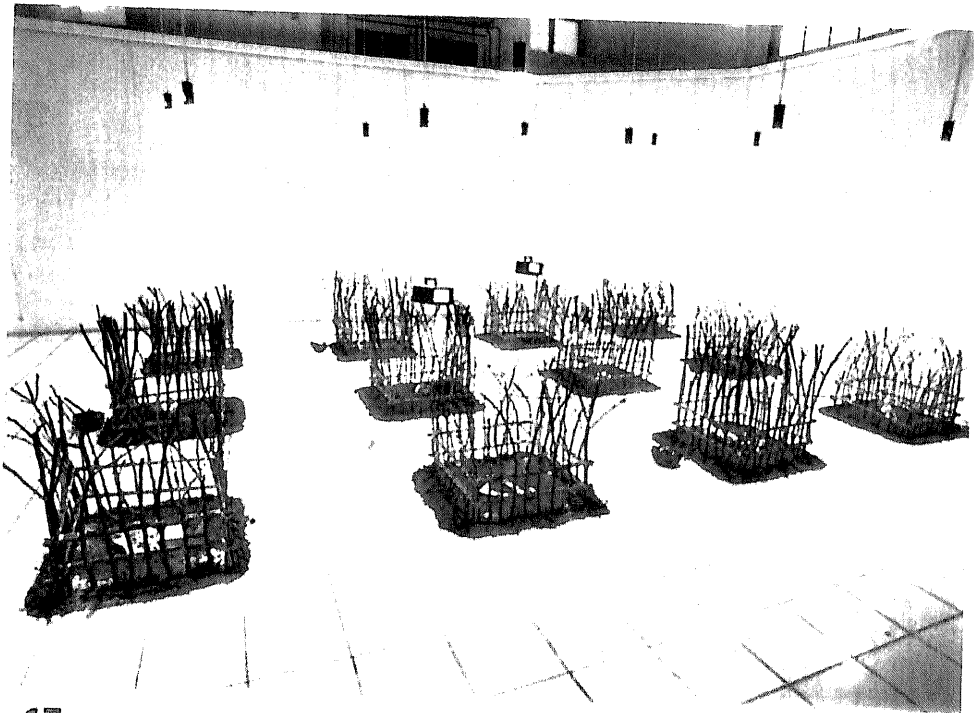




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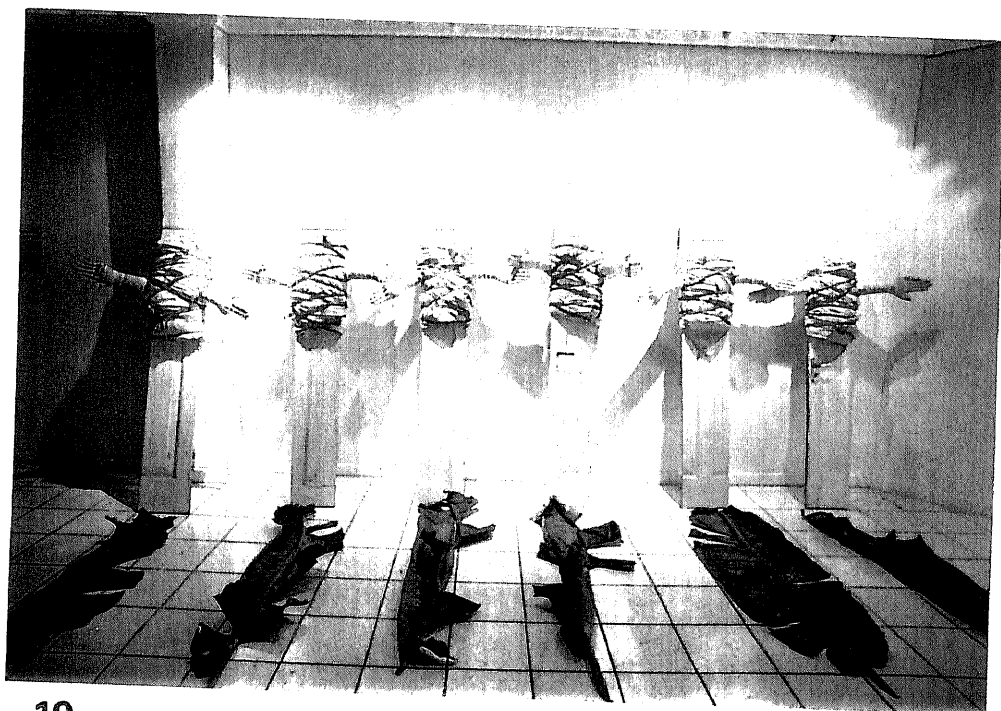




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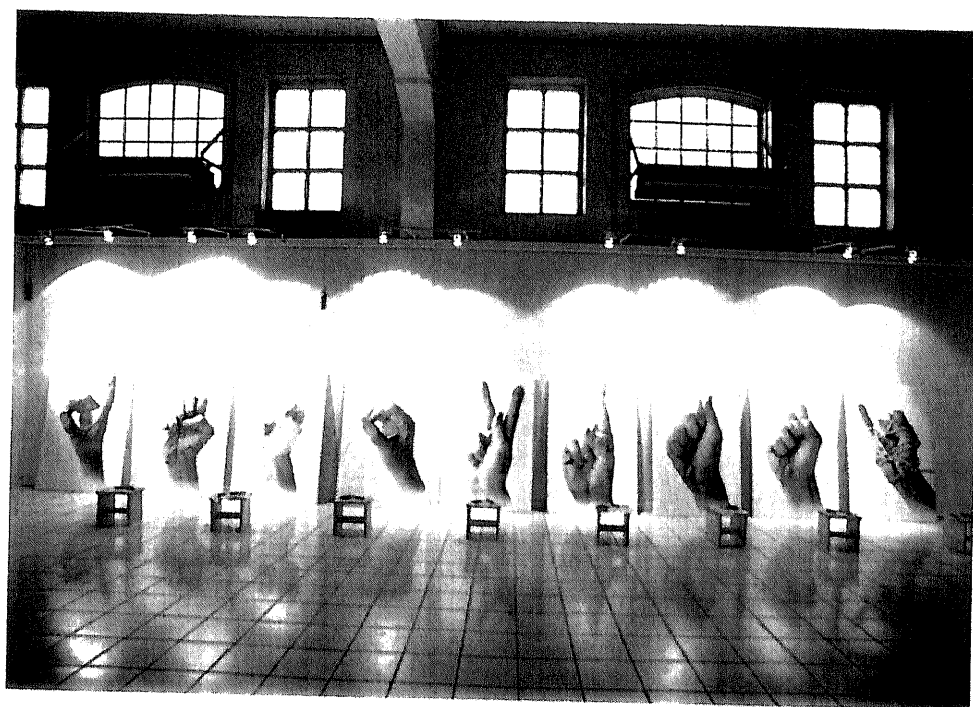




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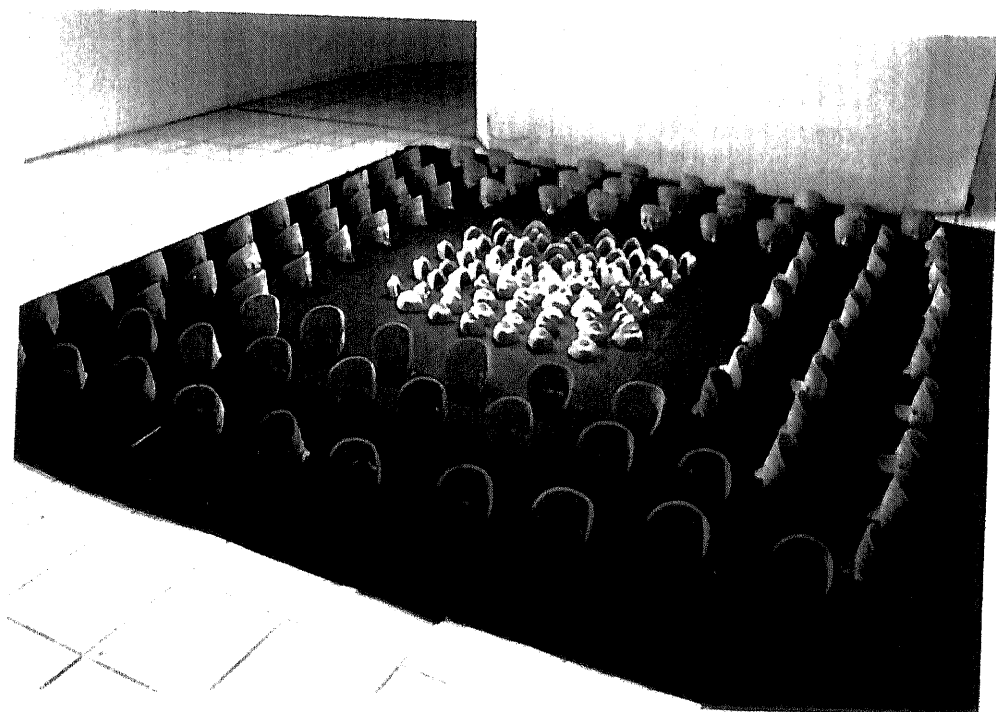
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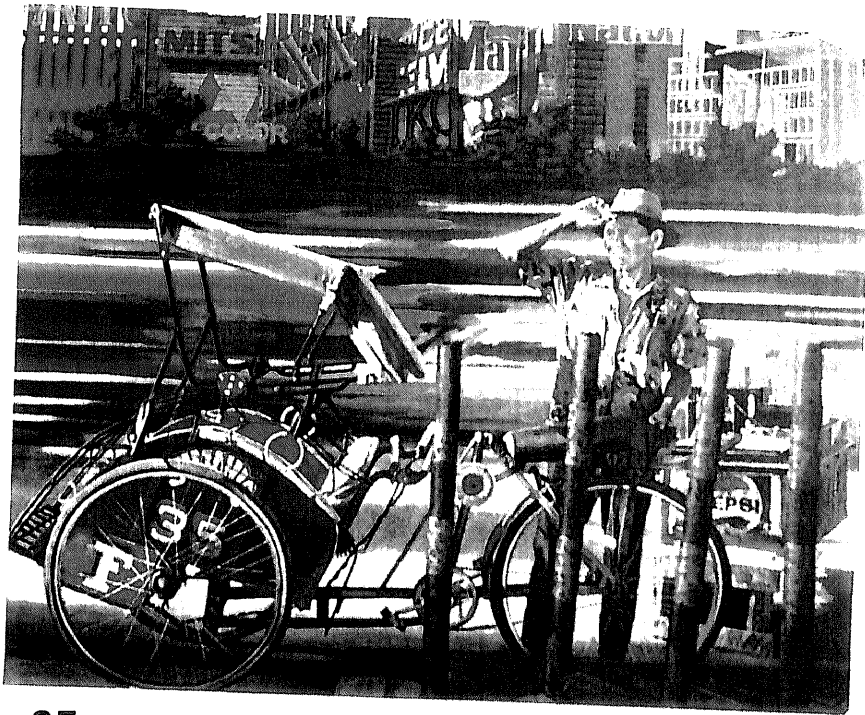




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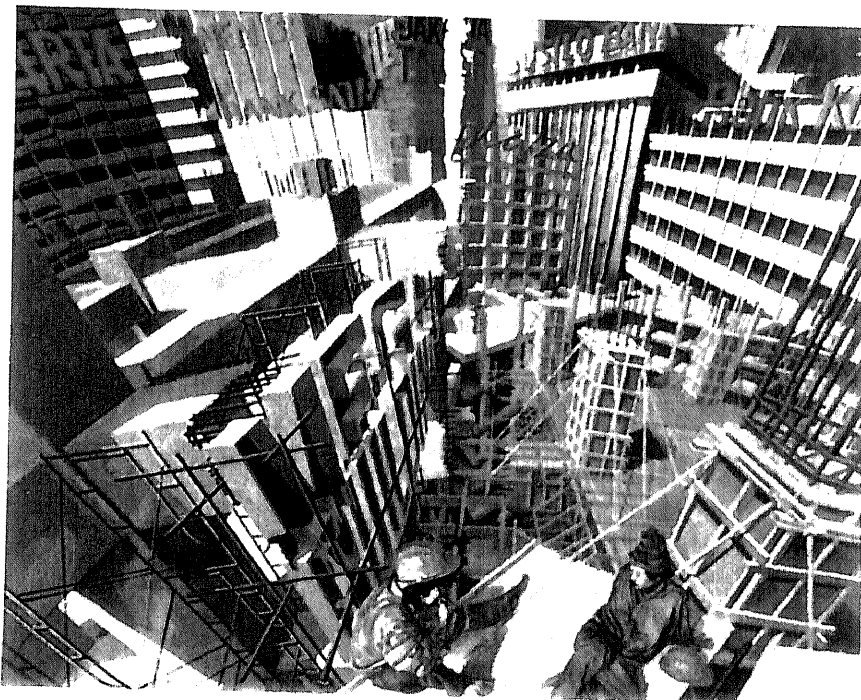
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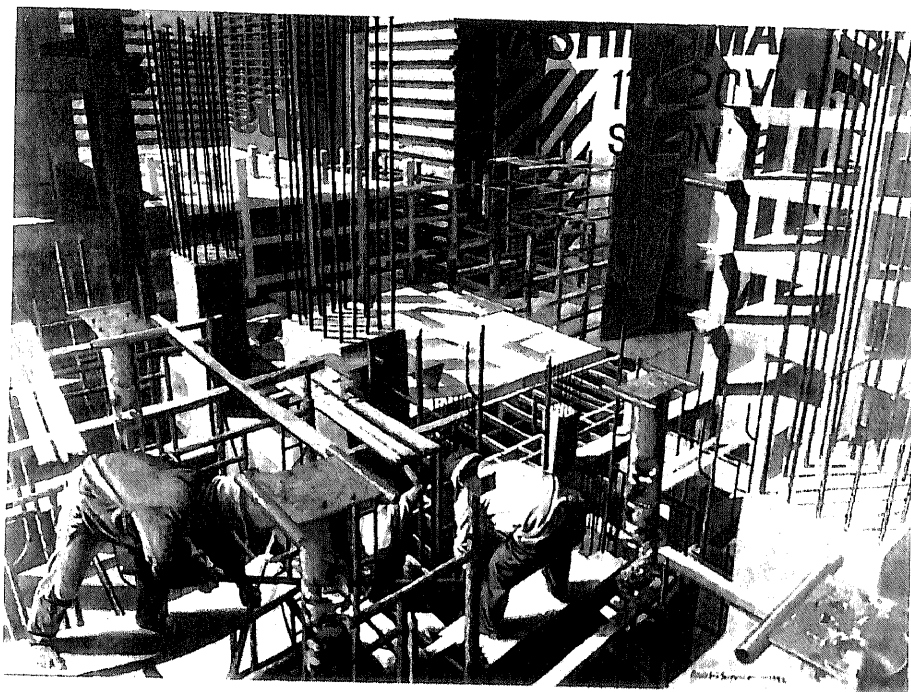




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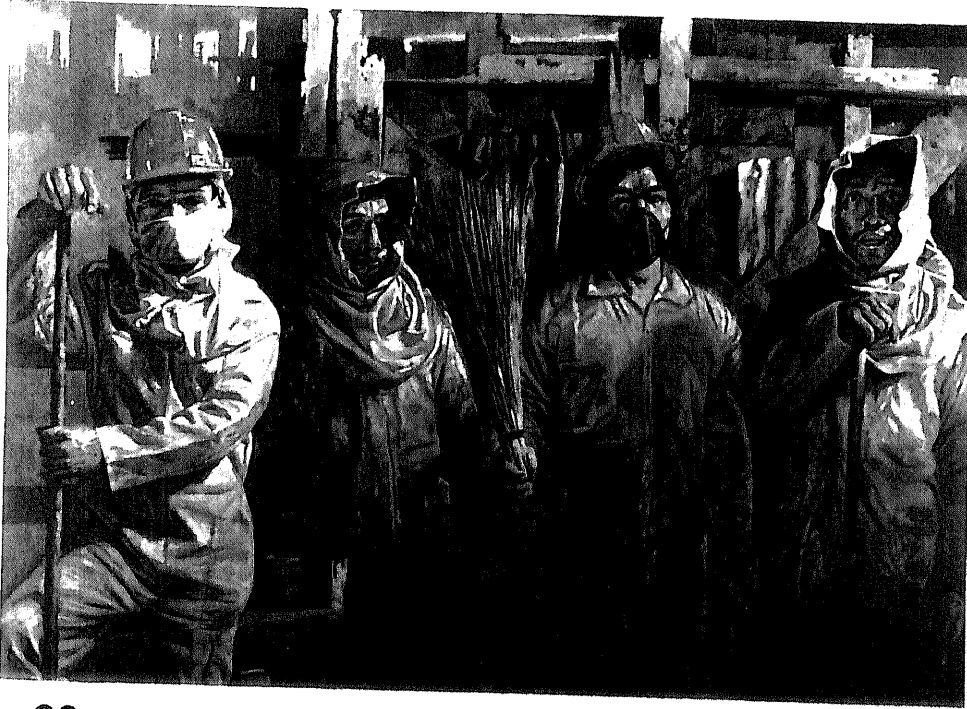




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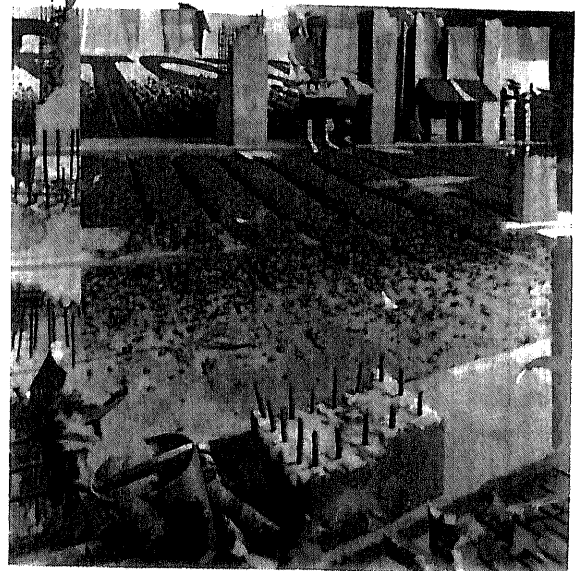


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## INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of early modern Indonesian art was nationalism. This spirit of nationalism was derived from the political turbulence created by Dutch colonisation, post World War II, Indonesians, as a proud and culturally strong people, rejected the idea of foreign domination. Hence, modern art which was implanted by *Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia* (PERSAGI, The Indonesian Painters Union, formed in 1937) artists, for the first time in Modern Indonesian Art History carried a political load. In doing so, PERSAGI offered artists an idea of being "nationalist-modernist" by portraying the daily life of "*rakyat kecil*", the common people or poor people .

*Rakyat kecil* was a primary subject matter in the first decade of modern Indonesian art. The theme of *rakyat kecil* had dominated the Indonesian art-world since the revolutionary period of the 1940s. However, the theme "disappeared" after the first decade during the political change from the Old Order to the New Order government<sup>1</sup>.

The New Order Government emphasised economic-growth by leaning on the West (Euro-America) as a model of development<sup>2</sup>. Mohtar Mas'oed, an

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<sup>1</sup>Mas'oed, Mohtar (1978). "The State Re-Organisation of Society under the New Order" **Prisma** The Indonesian Indicator. LP3ES no. 47. Jakarta. p. 4

Mohtar Mas'oed argued that the New Order government beliefs that the never-ending conflict over ideology during the Old Order led into state-economical breakdown.

<sup>2</sup>ibid

Indonesian political theorist, observed that the New Order Government used Euro-American theorists in supporting the economic-development as a basic ideology<sup>3</sup>. According to Mas'ood, Indonesian intellectuals who were educated in the United States of America believed that, the Euro-American development could be applied in Indonesia. However, a commitment to this development resulted in negative effects on Indonesian society. The Euro-American model, with individuality as a privileged life-style, was not entirely suitable for Indonesians who saw themselves as "a microcosm of society, the one cannot exist without the other..."<sup>4</sup>.

During the early period of the New Order, Claire Holt<sup>5</sup>, an American Art Historian, offered her theory. Holt said that modern Indonesian art could be developed from the diversity of traditional arts. Holt's theory was widely accepted by the returning young artists from overseas, in particular from the

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This notion was derived from the first Prime Minister in 1950s, Mr. Sutan Sjahrir, who said that Indonesia needed to be "an industrialised economy, an egalitarian society, and an activist welfare state founded on democratic principles".

<sup>3</sup>ibid pp. 5-6

One theorist was S.M. Lipset who argued that a nation would achieve a high degree of liberal democracy if it achieved a high level of economic development. Another theorist was D. Bell who had a deep knowledge of the Western history. Bell said that the West solved its problems during the Industrial Revolution by creating technological advances and economic development.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Rhodius and John Darling (1980) Walter Spies and Balinese Art, Zuthpen. p. 75. Although John Darling addressed this phrase for Balinese, this philosophy of life was found in other Indonesian ethnic groups too.

<sup>5</sup>Claire Holt was the first foreign scholar who investigated Indonesian art. So far, the only Indonesian art history was written by her. She did her research in Indonesia in the mid 1950s and published the book in 1967 by which time the situation she had described had changed substantially..



United States of America<sup>6</sup>. This notion created a dominant "established" modern Indonesian art in the exploration of traditional arts. In the period from 1966-1975, abstract-expressionism, based on personal contemplation and spiritual belief, together with decorative art and an exploration of traditional arts, flourished and dominated Indonesian modern art.

The political changes of the New Order government in the traumatic aftermath of the Communist *coup d'etat* have shaped modern Indonesian art. The history of visual arts in Indonesia has moved from the domination of nationalist art against Dutch colonisation, to socialist-realism, through to individual aesthetic expression either in abstract-expressionism or decorative art. This approach was the way that artists expressed their bitterness in the aftermath of the Communist coup. These art styles were acknowledged by some artists as the most compatible way to reach an ideal form of Indonesian art; however, for some more outspoken artists this approach was believed to be the death of Indonesian art.

In order to liberate society by exposing its wounds, a few radical Indonesian artists have broken through the culture of fear by speaking for "the voices of muted people"<sup>7</sup> in their works between 1980 and 1995. These artists are challenging the values of their society by showing the seaminess and unpleasant nature of daily phenomena in the modern Indonesian nation-state.

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<sup>6</sup>Bandung Art School at the second half of 1960s sent their young staff to USA to gain further art education.

<sup>7</sup>This title is inspired by F.X. Harsono's exhibition, held in Jakarta 1994 "*Mendengar ulang suara-suara yang hilang*" (Listening once more to lost voices, translated by Margaret Augusta)



As a result, some of the young outspoken artists and art students challenged the "establishment" art styles by founding the New Indonesian Art Movement (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*) in 1975. As well as reconstructing the new Indonesian art by breaking through the domination of the "old art"<sup>8</sup>, either in medium or content, the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* cried for a consideration of "social problems as more important issues to be discussed than personal feelings"<sup>9</sup>. Their attitude created a controversy both in art circles and in the government which had "established" depoliticization in order to create "greater national stability"<sup>10</sup>. These new artists faced rejection among the established artists as well as art critics who saw their work as "miscellaneous" art works. At the same time censorship was being applied through police action, such as the jailing of the painter Hardi in 1979 for his self portrait entitled "President of Indonesia 2001" (Figure 13) exhibited in the *Gerakan*

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<sup>8</sup>Old art means the dominant art styles which have been integrated and accepted well into academic categorisation and artistic expression in Indonesia. These are primarily abstract-expressionism and decorative art.

<sup>9</sup>The second point of their five line manifesto;

1. Banishing as far as possible the images of "limited art" (ie: painting, sculpture and printmaking).
2. Believing in actual social problems as more important issues to be discussed than personal feelings.
3. Opposing the "master-apprentice" attitude.
4. Striving for Indonesian Art based on Indonesian art theorist.
5. Striving for art which is integral to the society.

See Brita Maklai (1991) "Exposing the Society's Wounds" for fuller description.

<sup>10</sup>The official phrase which is always used to counter the rebel notion. Also see F.X. Harsono (1993.a) "*Seni rupa berorientasi pada politik, Sah*" **Kompas** 30 Mei 1993

*Seni Rupa Baru* exhibition in Jakarta. Hardi had printed his self-portrait in the formal presidential costume<sup>11</sup>.

As well as the rejection from that audience, inner problems among the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* artists simmered and led to the end of its activity.

Although the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* had to stop its activities, the artists have taken responsibility, through aesthetic means, to ensure socio critical awareness in society<sup>12</sup>. As Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez says:

In a certain sense, each society gets the art it deserves, both because of the art it favours or tolerates, and because artists, as members of society, they have with the society. This means that art and society, far from finding themselves in a relationship of mutual externality or indifference, either seek each other out or avoid one another, meet or separate, but can never completely turn their backs on each other...

The relationship between art and society cannot be ignored, for art itself is a social phenomenon; first, because the artist, however unique his primary experience might be, is a social being; second because his work, however deeply marked by his primary experience and however unique and unrepeatable its objection or form might be, is always a bridge, a connecting link between the artists and other members of society; third, because a work of art affects other people -it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals, or values- and is a

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<sup>11</sup>During that time the issue of the future president of Indonesia was considered as a very sensitive topic. Even today, the topic is still discussed widely but still as a public secret.

<sup>12</sup>F.X. Harsono (1995) "*Seni Rupa pun membidik Kekuasaan*" **Republika** 22 Januari 1995

social force which, with its emotional or ideological weight, shakes or moves people...<sup>13</sup>.

This thesis does not attempt to explain the political movement which has been shaping the Indonesian art form nor to write Indonesian art history; however, to understand and then, to examine the contemporary artists' attitude toward their social commitment in the period 1980-1995. In doing so the historical background and cultural polemics will intersect. From interviews with some outspoken artists and writers in the Old and the New Order eras, this thesis aims to examine the conflicts among Indonesian contemporary artists due to their wish to shape Indonesian art through their social commitment. Two modern critical artists have been chosen in order to highlight the tension existing both in the Indonesian art world and more importantly within Indonesian society as a whole. The chosen artists are F.X. Harsono in his multimedia art works and, Dede Eri Supria in his photorealist paintings.

Firstly, I will review the Modern Indonesian art movement which has been shaped by socio-political changes, and the artists' social commitment.

Secondly, I will investigate F.X. Harsono and Dede Eri Supria's attitudes towards their "voice for the muted people" in content, idea, and form.

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<sup>13</sup>Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez (1973) Art and Society, essays in Marxist Aesthetics, p.112