

Object(-ify):

Reconsidering objects

I

The initial idea for this exhibition is to showcase works with the theme of still life. One particular exhibition catalogue, which records the results of a survey on still life works in the traditions of the art in the West, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (1), becomes the impetus to hold an exhibition under such theme. Still, the context of this exhibition is different from the previous one. Naturally, I am not curating historical works; instead, my efforts here are directed more towards showcasing works of the artists invited to react to the theme of still life. Why still life, then? How are we to understand this theme? In Indonesia, the theme of still life is of course known to every one who has ever studied art, especially the art of painting. It is common, too, if the theme is understood merely as a stage in the traditions of learning how to draw or paint. Indeed, not all the art tradition in Indonesia is familiar with the theme of still life, but the traditions of the modern art does teach the stages: one who is learning how to paint, must first study the subject matter with the theme of still life as the initial learning stage, before moving to the theme of landscapes, seascapes, or townscapes. The last learning stage will be model paintings, using models as the subject matter, from the animals up to the human models. Therefore, it is the painting of a human being that becomes the end goal of the learning process. Such learning process is influenced by a belief that places human beings as the ultimate measure for all kinds of observations and conclusions. Such attitude is called anthropocentric. This also happens in Indonesia, and is used by everyone who has ever studied art, whether formally or informally. Such belief is invariably a part of the artistic traditions that we are learning about along the way, as we are trying to understand about life and about how to become modern (human beings).

As we reconsider the fate of still life works in the narration of art history, we are apparently used to agreeing with the linear logic of progress. What I mean is this. Art history does not actually include works with the theme of still life as an important point in the development of art. What is needed in the history of the development of art is the narration of the ideas of progress, which is shown more often in the paintings on human beings and their environment. The narration of art history, therefore, is more focused on the efforts to uphold the theme of portraiture and human

figures or the situations of human environment: from the depiction on an artist's studio, the environment of the city, to the portrayal of a landscape. Subject matter about still life or the "realm of objects" is considered more as a form resulting from observations with too-small a scale, done too closely, and does not therefore depict the result of the explorations due to the human's curiosity and human's mastery on knowledge and nature. The theme of still life or the realm of objects is still seen more often as belonging to the initial stages of the long chain of efforts done by humans to understand and identify the vast nature and the environment around them.

Indeed, grand narration on progress in the art history does not always manage to undermine our consideration on still life or the realm of objects. The story about the "artistic turnarounds" done by Paul Cézanne and Marcel Duchamp, each in a different time, comes to mind. Cézanne is considered as one of the artists who created a landmark in the development of the post-impressionistic art in nineteenth century France. Paintings with the theme of still life done by Cézanne—which he made quite a lot, along with works under the theme of figures and landscapes—became an important landmark that signifies the changes in the ways of modern paintings. Cézanne's still life, made using brilliant and vivid colors, managed to bring artists after Cézanne to the awareness on the importance of understanding the plane of a painting as an autonomous reality, loaded with the problematic of the creation of unique and special forms and colors. Such depiction of still life then separates the paintings of objects from the principles of copying realistically objects and things. Cézanne's principle and his version of still life then went on to be watched and developed by the succeeding artists after him, ones who would be known as the cubists, the followers of the cubism principles, in the beginning of the 20th century.

From another direction, Marcel Duchamp touched upon yet another kind of awareness when he display the urinal titled *Fountain*, complete with a signature ("R. Mutt"). It was absurd and shocking. At that time, Duchamp was promoting an artistic principle that would be known as the *readymades* strategy. Unlike Cézanne, Duchamp thought that there was no aesthetic distance that should be taken between an artwork with daily objects. He took an already-existing industrial product, signed it, and exhibited it. Here Duchamp not only mocked the belief about the autonomous reality of a work of art created through various artistic principles, which in turn made it distinct, unique, and original. Furthermore, *Fountain* showed Duchamp's cynical attitude toward the artists in his generation, whom he felt as being hypocritical. Duchamp intentionally chose and used objects or things that no other artists in his generation would consider as the

subject matter for their sophisticated artistic expressions. Once again, the theme of still life became political. Duchamp's readymades artistic strategy then continued to grow. Through the experience of the Pop Art movement in the sixties, up to its development in the eighties, the contemporary art recognizes and popularizes the term of "object" to describe three-dimensional art works that critics and the artists themselves are reluctant to call as "sculptural art works" or sculptures. The term of "object" is used especially because the thing concerned has a close relationship with the realm of objects in the daily life. The term can explain the works that make use of the readymades strategy, and also other three-dimensional works that are created and worked upon still in defiance of the monolithic and auratic principles of conventional sculptural art works.

We can learn something from the stories of Cézanne and Duchamp. There have been two changes in the artistic tendencies that we can view as the problematic of the still life works. First of all are the changes concerning the "way of depiction" or the representation of the realm of objects or still life. After the impressionism (Cézanne) and the development of cubism, we have begun to understand the principles of the abstract art. The second change, meanwhile, concerns the political choices about the kinds and types of objects or things that we call as "art works." The readymades principle of Duchamp tells us about the conceptional strength and power of an artist as the base for an aesthetic stance, one that is beyond the hierarchy and attitude of differentiating the choices of the subject matter for an artwork.

For us in Indonesia, who only inherit the narration of the history of modern art, the question is how to adapt the matter of the still life tradition. Why is the theme of still life important to us? To me, it is about the willingness to re-consider the things that we are used to viewing as common in the practices of the Indonesian art. These last five years and more, the development of the Indonesian art is full of grand narrations on the heroic changes in the social and political realms. For almost a decade, the development of art in Indonesia goes through upheavals and miracles of the monetary and economic crises—not to mention the fact that the development of the Indonesian modern and contemporary art takes places in a society that is not completely modern and rational; such development is dominated by the symbols of belief that is one time traditional, spiritual, and mystical, another time irrational, stereotypical, or mythical. It is possible for us to be sure that we have indeed inherited the narration of the history of modern art as a frame for the understanding of the artistic modes of production. But we might be apprehensive when we must understand that particular history as an epic about the values on progress, rationality, or

modernity. If the practices of Indonesian art in the past few years have been dominated by the grand themes of power and politics, wouldn't it be interesting for us to reconsider those practices from yet another point of view? Doesn't the matter of objects, of things or still life—which has been often judged as being “simple,” and too subjective due to its main concern on things from the proximity of the artist—also have an interesting side? I think the invitations for the artists to participate in this exhibition is motivated by the desire to not take things for granted, to be not overtly certain that to notice simple and small things is a waste of time.

The title for this exhibition puts a noun (“object”) alongside with its verb (“to objectify”). The Oxford dictionary explains “to objectify” is “to make objective; to express in a concrete form” or “to present as an object of perception.” Therefore, discussion about the idea of the still life is meant not merely to describe the efforts to depict one or more things or objects, but also to gather all its various goals and meanings.

II

In her effort to describe the still life exhibition at the MoMA that she curated, Margit Rowell explained:

The still life is an evolving system of representation and of meaning, directly related to the transformations of society and of artistic discourse. It addresses certain positions a society maintains in relation to its objects: realities, fantasies, and desires (1.

Keeping in mind what Cézanne and Duchamp have previously done, we will then naturally be able to agree with Rowell. The belief in the autonomous value of a work of art, for example, is naturally born not out of the artist's desire, but is formed instead due to the social and cultural transformations that call for the application for some specific sets of value system in the various aspects of life (in science, technology, or art). With the existence of the specialization of values and value systems, it will be easier for us to judge our progress and success, or failure and foolishness. What Duchamp has done is clearly a critique against the failure and foolishness of the modernity programs. As we measure the progress or the backwardness of a society, we must remember that there is always a duality in such judgment. In a modern society, there are not only the optimism of rationality, but also the irrational madness. Similar thing is true for a society often categorized as “not yet modern”—there exist probably not only various practices of

“idiocy”, but also an abundance of a “letting-go” attitude.

Just as Rowell had concluded, the matter about the objects or still life is actually dilemmatic. We only realize this after putting much effort to analyze it. In the development of the Indonesian art, much still needs to be done in terms of the processes to assign and analyze meanings. We have not fully understood why still life paintings, created in the fifties by artists such as Srihadi Soedarsono, Mochtar Apin, or G Sidharta Soegijo, received so much resistance. All we know is that their works did not go hand-in-hand with the attitude of the artists and critics who harbored certain ideology—one that denigrates the embourgeoisement of the world. We did not realize that the depictions of still life were also correlated with the artists’ belief in the universal humanism—a principle that was not only believed in the freedom of expression for every artist as an individual, but also contained a spirit about the dynamic of individual beliefs in attaining social progress and modernity. In the perception of the political ideology of the time, it was not only the form of the abstract paintings themselves that could be judged as “not siding with the people,” but the subject matter itself was also problematic: still life. A reading of the development of the Indonesian art in the seventies and eighties offers similar conclusion and shows how ignorant we have been. The use of various objects or things by the proponents of the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (New Art Movement) since the 1974 show until the 1987 exhibition, can also be seen as an artistic strategy that contains the dimension of the still life tradition. We have never been fully aware of the fact that the choice and usage of the things and objects by the supporters of the movement were also political; that the objects and things were used to show the attitude to free themselves from the orthodox attitude and the utter social obedience. Yet the narration on the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* in Indonesia is generally understood merely as a movement done by young artists against the establishment of the education system and the system of the art critique in Indonesia, as well as against the depoliticization of art by the power of the government.

As has been mentioned earlier, this exhibition does not wish to delve into the historical dimension; instead, it wishes to show the reactions of the invited artists toward the theme of still life. However, it is certain that the theme of still life stores many problems within it; problems that are often clouded by our interest in the depiction of the grand themes. This is true not only in the narration of the history of the modern art in the West, but also here in Indonesia. What we will be facing in this exhibition is some works that serve to make us re-consider about the objects and the realm of objects. Indeed, there are some important notes on the environment and the condition that surround the creation of the works. These works are created in an era when the

passion to give birth to some artistic breakthrough is no longer in fashion. Today is also an era when the (politics of) economy—and not the (ideologies of) politics—reigns supreme. The practices of art undergo an extraordinary development; the time of “anything goes,” says someone, or the era of the implosion (the disappearance of borders), says another.

In any case, the theme of still life is never easy to be cast aside; it can always appear and re-appear as a problem, as a kind of sub-version of the dominant subject matter that is often formed mainly by depictions of human beings. The matter to choose, or to show objects or certain things as the subject matter of a work contains a problem that is constantly connected to the context of the changes in the practices and discourses of the art itself. As an addendum, Rowell’s experience might serve as a lesson for us, when she analyzed how an object of certain things are chosen as a part of the work in the tradition of the still life during the development of the modern art in the West. She explains that

The process of selection is traditionally influenced by the role certain objects play in the context of a given society. Although the objects are relatively generic, as subjects they are not timeless; their choice is dictated by their place, be it passive or aggressive, in a historical and cultural fabric. (2