

THE BEAUTIFUL, THE WORSE, AND THE UGLY: A Fragment of Indonesian Intellectual History

Once upon a time there was a small group of five young and angry Indonesian artists who arguing the degraded quality of Indonesian modern art. In the year of 1974, just two years before the Great Cultural Revolution was disbanded in China, they launched a small revolution in a small bottle. In the mean time the great Indochinese war was still taking its ultimate destruction, and Indonesia was a country full of hope, with a promising bright future colored by its first five years' development plan project.

Nonetheless the wind of the frustration are accumulating its exploding power. The student revolt has been staged and broken in the beginning of 1974, with many activists were incarcerated and locked up in jail. A white terror was everywhere, included in the art academy, or in the cultural life in general. The general repressive regime has consolidating its power base, and as symbolic as it was, the first Grand Art Exhibition was held in Taman Ismail Marzuki [TIM], Jakarta, as an effort to mold the art world on the image of this new regime. The old guard of Indonesian paintings took its upper hand power by awarding some "decorative" painting as the best performer of the year. These small group of young artists reacted strongly, harshly and negatively. They open a public debate by a joint communique they called "The Black December" (1974). And then followed a series of a chain reaction with its web and low, and dissipated in the end of 2016 with a retroactive exhibition held at ISI Yogyakarta with a banner flying high in the air entitled "Reinterpretation of The New Fine Art " [Menafsir Seni Rupa Baru].

Soon after the statement inscribed in the "Black December" they were expelled or more exactly "excommunicated" from the art world, these young 'samurais', soon, *Im Augenblick*, by single movement of an order they have been transformed into an outcast, a group of 'ronin' without social status, without future. During the precise moment, the so called Yogya group [*kubu Yogya*] roaming in the wilderness and met the Bandung group [*kubu Bandung*]. As if by divine accident they form their alliance which later on will be called Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru [GSRB].

What Is At Stake ?

The idea, or more precisely, the concept which is presented as clear as possible in this moment for the sake of a rational ground, it consists of three stages of construction :

1. The first stage is the beautiful moment of a dialectical encounter between the Yogya and Bandung group.
2. The second stage is arriving with the statement that this art movement has been dissolved. It is the worse moment.
3. And lastly, when the 21st century begins its array of discursive and interpretative efforts are proliferating. This is the ugly moment which all of us facing up gleefully.

Let us make a little digression in order to narrow down the space of discussion by letting it clear the term "*rupa*" in *seni-rupa* which is the center of the whole debate. As far as I can trace the origin of this term, the only place I can find is in the domain of philosophical analysis of human personality in the history of Asian way of thinking. The philosophical technical term is *Pancaskanda*, it means a heap of aggregates composed of five elements. The first element is called "*nama rupa*", the second *vedana* [sensation], the third *samjna* [perception], then *samskara* [disposition] and lastly *vijnana* [consciousness]. The very important aspect of this Asian philosophy is that there is no single element determining the whole. It's a heap elements without binary distinction as it is affirmed in western philosophy, that is body/mind or content/form or substance/accidence, etc. And what is *nama rupa* ?

"*Nama*" is something which can only be apprehend by direct experience [*pratyaksa*] and ultimately can be verbalized in a sentential structure. And "*rupa*" it is not in contradistinction with content, but surprisingly it is the inversion of the "being" [*tatva*], it's the nothingness. If that is so, how about "*seni-rupa*" ? The answer is : just go to Borobudur temple, and take note that this great *stupa* is a big *sutra* inscribed as the reliefs construction which can only read by a bodily movement, called *pradaksina*. The complicated and the very sophisticated content condensed in *Avatamsaka Sutra* is not presented in language, in *aksara*, but in *rupa*. With the architectural design divided in three stages [*kama, rupa and arupa*]. I hope you are able to get a glance or guess what the Asian thinker has in mind.

How about *seni rupa baru* ? It should be stated clearly that its newness or the novelty of the movement is, just strictly speaking, still inside this Asian paradigm. But does it mean that all things have been covered by this Asian big concept ? Absolutely not. When *Pancaskanda* is understood as never prioritizing any element of its aggregation, especially the consciousness [*vijnana*] as it is known in the west, all our commonsense value will disintegrate suddenly, and a confused and perplexed mind will emerge. Any form is nothingness and the void is the form. *Aksara* is degraded, and *rupa* is exalted. If you go to French and find the term "*beaux-arts*" or you are traveling to UK and find the "*fine arts*" then you translate it as *seni rupa*, I'm sure you will be drown deeply in a phantasmagoria view of the world.

The second concept to be defined is the idea of "politics". This term in an usual context is understood as the craving of power, the political party, the coup d'etat, etc. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, in our era of contemporary political theory, a new division of concept is introduced, that's between "*das politische*" and "*die politiek*" between the political and the politics. What does it mean ?

Along the line of Heidegger in concept of the ontological difference between the ontic and the ontological level of analysis, so the politics such activity as general election, mass strike, etc, while the political is understood in inherently exceptional base for any political activity, it is defined by tracing the demarcation line between friend/enemy.

The political in a strict sense is always already conflictual, while the politics is from the very beginning always in search of a veil to enclose the horror of the void. In other word: the political is the disclosure of the real monstrous power, while the politics is

any effort to gentrify or to tame the wildness or the brutality of the power in any sense without value. The politics is a self enclosure of the fear in itself.

With the digression into these two fundamental concepts, I have laid down on a foundational principle, where you are invited to agree or to contest a further description of the way this short history of GSRB is presented. In an old logician's term, *tertium non datur*, there is no third or dubious proposition.

When It Was Still Beautiful?

When a two tier party make an alliance, even in their oppositional standing, it's surely a beautiful thing in the world, a "disjunctive synthesis" a real reality. Why? To be sure, it's only a human who is capable of such miraculous thing. When the Yogya group as the mainstream power decided to go together with its junior partner from Bandung and then they form a sort of a pact of agreement, named later on as GSRB, it is really wonderful.

If you read carefully the text of "Black December" scrutinizing the "Five Strategic Points" of GSRB, then you will find the feeling of an outburst of emotion, anger, hope or even a deep jealousy toward the "old", the "established", etc.

With a slight hindsight we can also detect a lure of the delusion grandeur, as if the history is on our side, the march toward the future of modern Indonesian art will be brighter and powerful if you, the old guys, hear our demand.

Sociologically speaking, what happens during this first phase is a displacement from external abstract negation, that's a conflict or a certain tension between the young and the old, between the citizen and the bureaucracy with its final ending in silencing the voice of the rabble and expelled it out of the city. This symbolic castration created a sense of collective pain, humiliation and a deep sense of injustice. While the rapprochement between the Yogya and Bandung group creates a new solidarity and the courage to move on the road to fight, and in the mean time by neglecting a possibility of a new conflict inside the group.

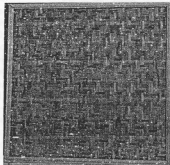
GSRB, in other word, is an accumulative series of contradictory force without anyone or anybody has the capacity to pacify or find a final solution between its currents. It's really the power of negation in its simplest form, a dialectical movement with its own amazing power. By discerning a little bit more details, the Yogya group has suffered a powerful blow from their elders, while Bandung group is a band of young, well fed and well clothed as the "sons and daughters of good families" where the flow of their lives is experienced as normal pleasure seeking style of life, far from sweat and poverty, they are originated from social life of middle class milieu.

To get the idea on how this power of negation is able to produce a collective product without ignoring its uneasy relation we can take a look at the *oeuvre* of Murjoto Hartoyo and Jim Supangkat at the first exhibition at TIM₁₉₇₅. Jim has the Ken Dedes, a deformed statue of a well known archaeological artifact, while Murjoto participates with his *Gedek* [sewn bamboo skin] with a title "main-main" [please be not too serious]

They share a common ground: (1) Whatever the material, it can be utilized as a media for artistic creation. (2) The art expression has no duty whatsoever to present the "artistic" value as it is acknowledged by its own community. But without admitting the

slogan "the media is the message", it is evident from what position these two artists has spoken out. In defending his conviction that the art can be found anywhere, by his medium, Murjoto is dismissing the artistic process itself by by-passing the framed and the framing, the difference between the content and the form. It is a very strong signal from Yogya *ronin*. While Jim with his sexuaton of Ken Dedes, is successful in giving the shocking effect for the viewers by secularizing the image of a Javanese imaginary symbol of wisdom. But the problem does not stop here. There is some more question to be posed for the deformed sexuaton of Ken Dedes.

1. By vandalizing or deforming Ken Dedes, does he know that this statue is a very respected icon in Javanese culture ? His ignorance or his stupidity is guaranteed by the idea of a semiotic freedom as defined by bio semiotician.
2. By producing Ken Dedes in its semblance, symbolically he introduce a new image of the traditional one. And it is guaranteed by the hermeneutic discipline.
3. And what really disturbing in viewing the artistic product if we consider the piece of art in its movement as agglomeration between Yogya and Bandung group, in a senses of sociologising the art, then without any doubt it is a fetish, by the way of a whimsical inversion, it functions as an effort formulating the fantasy out of the libidinal vortex of any incestuous relation typically found in a narcissist personality.



"Ken Dedes" by Jim Supangkat & "Gedek" by Murjoto Hartoyo

I am stretching to the very extremity of the uncanny relation consisting the GSRB group formation : the position of the rabble is evident in Yogya group, while Bandung group by way of Jim's work prepare the road out of the pain and symbolic castration and move into the world of fantasy, especially sexual imagery.

However bitter and sour their personal relation within the GSRB itself, it is the best solution out of a peaceful co-existence between the rivaling interest, background, and social status. The first exposition at TIM, 1975 was a real breakthrough in the history of Indonesian art. A step backwards, two steps forwards.

The Worse Stage

Indonesian history is full of political bickering between the parties engaged in their struggle. Neglecting this aspect is identical with letting the blind spot dominates the space. So it happen in the modern art history.

In an explicit term, Bandung group is taking the a-political side at that time, while Yogya group, without their choice has been immersed deeply into political conflict. What does it mean ?

Priyanto Sunarto has given us a very clear and colorful description by his psychography presented in the second exposition, 1976, held at Balai Budaya, Jakarta. It is a good information, but the problem should be found in the other scene. Not in psychology but in political area itself.

Based on her complex structure, the Indonesian society, the politics was and has been understood and executed as the real power struggle. The function of institutional building is not from an Hobbesian model: you give one part of your freedom to the acknowledged authority, and then you have the right to demand her protection. The military regime in the seventies took a step further by limiting the political participation exclusively for the town dweller. It is a great step toward depoliticization in all ways of life especially for educational establishment. The net impact of this program is the sterilization



of university student from any contact with the 'dirty' politics. When the Bandung group confess that they are apolitical, it means that they are the direct product of regime's strategy. Why it creates a problem, even in art movement ?

First, historically : Indonesian intellectual in general including the writer, poet or painter, dancer, etc is always and already -It means naturally- engaged in politics in a very traditional sense. This predisposition can never be neglected.

Second, academically : the political science as it is practiced is totally the introduction of Americanism way of handling and understanding the politics. In the height of military regime's repression, the political science is in a deadlock.

As far as it is concerning our matter in this reflection, it can be said that The Bandung group is protected the wall of their ignorance behaving socially as a respected individual in a modernizing society, where the politics is understood as ghostly entities, and that is why they took the distance by what is called an apolitical stance. And you know, it is a real total fantasy, as if you can live in another space without politics. While The Yogya group has always been ready to enliven up the politics in the very fundamental sense without knowing or even consciously choosing the side. In the German language we can say, the Yogya group "*gehen zum politische*", while The Bandung group "*gehen nicht zur politiek*".

During the second exposition, 1976, the worse has arrived. Two things can be cited as a sign of the worsening condition: (1) The junior partner proclaims itself as the self

appointed speaker of the movement. (2) As the time goes on, the interpretative work, that is the discourse act of the movement is dominated by this apolitical group with its strong tendency toward the fantasy.

With this series of event, the big idea and wording of the "Black December" is forgotten. The Bandung member of the movement accused the "Black December" as obscure, unclear or even a bit too excessive.

With the publication of a book accompanying the fourth exposition, 1979, Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia, the death and the mummification of the living struggle has found its point of no return.

The Ugly Is The Fantasy

But the resurrection of the repressed is coming back into the world in 1987 exposition. It was a real ghostly appearance. With the "*Pasar Raya Dunia Fantasi*", a real anticlimax was attained. It is a living death which is moving around the market, the paradise of Indonesian middle class and a nightmare for the rabble and the working class or the lowest class in general.



When the 21st century is coming then there is a flourishing activity, a fashionable thing to be produced by what is called "The Seminar". The quality of this discourse production is very debatable, because the dominating color inherited from the junior partner where the art is isolated in its own interest, and even sometimes is treated as westernizing project under the name of globalization, postmodernism, multiculturalism, etc. When at last a big gathering is organized at ISI Yogya in the end of 2016 discussing the story of the GSRB we see a heart-breaking moment of the privatization of this art movement when some partisans member proceed with their version of the movement by kind of "private personal diary".

When a collective movement is privatized the possibility of progress is falling apart.

It is a sheer hubris which is capable of being the truth in so far as it is repeated over and over again. GSRB will forever be famous because its fame automatically reproduced itself by its tautological cacophony.

A sober remembrance is always needed in order to keep the power of enlivening resistance alive, an important characteristic of the intellectual life in Indonesia.

Last remark...

A perspicuous reader of this paper will see that it is not the intention of this narrative to describe a sort of an art criticism. The art is taken as an example from the ghostly defined "reality", that is "the real". The art is the way of seeing, experiencing or revolting against that reality in its special way. And the problem which is painfully being explained is the fact that language or discourse has always have the capacity to kill or to mummify the living experience of the struggle.

In this regard I'm strongly on the side of Asian way of thinking which defines the meaning of the word as "excluding the other meaning" [anya poha]. And here is one good example of that idea :

*For there is suffering, but none who suffers
Doing exists, although there is no doer
Extinction is, but no extinguished person
Although there is a path, there is no goer.*

-Visuddhi magga 16,
Budhagosa, 4th Century-

Or am "I" alone walking in the dark night of Indonesian intellectual trajectory ?

Yogyakarta 8.12.16
Emmanuel Subangun

Soon after the statement inscribed in the "Black December" they were expelled or more exactly "excommunicated" from the art world, these young "artists", soon to be forgotten by single movement of an order they have been transformed into an object, a group of "outs" without social status, without future. During the twelve months, the so called Yogya group (Jaka Yogya) mourning in the wilderness and met the Bandung group (Jaka Bandung). As if by divine accident they form their alliance which later on will be called Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB).

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