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# Some Things That Have Happened to *The Sun After September 1965*: Politics and the Interpretation of an Indonesian Painting

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We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures.

—Michael Baxandall

Practices are seldom intrinsically either liberatory or oppressive [and] seldom contain their politics as an essence but rather occupy particular historical situations from which they enter into various exchanges, or negotiations, with practices designated “political.”

—Catherine Gallagher

As most tell the story, the mysterious and fearful twilight of Sukarno’s Indonesia began in Jakarta sometime after sundown on the last day of September

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1965.<sup>1</sup> That night and in the early hours of October 1, a group led by leftist, middle-ranking military officers calling themselves the September Thirtieth Movement kidnapped and killed six generals in an attempted putsch. In its radio broadcasts the following morning, the movement announced its loyalty to President Sukarno and claimed that it had acted in order to thwart a coup planned by a “Council of Generals.” In the year leading up to the putsch, the president’s hold on power had been strained by the increasing polarization between the army and disaffected Muslims on the one hand, and Sukarno and the PKI—the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Kommunis Indonesia)—on the other. Sukarno’s ill health, factionalism within military ranks, and the shadow of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) only added to the anxiety and uncertainty. It is unclear whether this Council of Generals had anything more than a phantom existence. What is clear is that the head of the strategic reserve command in Jakarta, Major General Soeharto, was quick to manipulate the situation and bring the movement to a halt within hours. In an evening radio broadcast on October 1, Soeharto described the putsch as a counter-revolutionary movement and told listeners that the army and police under his leadership had regained control.

Soeharto and the army put blame on the communist left for the first time when gruesome photographs of the slain generals appeared in the press a few days later. So began a campaign that aggravated smoldering religious and class tensions. Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of Javanese, Balinese, North Sumatrans, and ethnic Chinese with real or suspected ties to the PKI met their death at the hands of vigilantes and army units.<sup>2</sup> Tens of thousands of writers, artists, intellectuals, and civil servants who had been involved with the communist party or other leftist organizations came under arrest. Some still remain in prison. On March 11, 1966, less than six months after the attempted coup, Soeharto demanded and took formal transfer of presidential authority from Sukarno. Over thirty years later, Soeharto has yet to relinquish that authority.

Soeharto’s regime calls itself the New Order. In contrast to the Sukarno years, the New Order period has been not only a time of aggressive and largely successful economic development but also one of choking political uniformity and authoritarian rule. Exercising power in the name of stability, development, and the state doctrine known as *Pancasila*,<sup>3</sup> the Soeharto regime tolerates no challenge to its authority and thwarts most calls for political

<sup>1</sup> General accounts and bibliographies about the events are available in: Anderson and McVey (1971), Cribb (1990), Crouch (1978), Legge (1980), McDonald (1980), Ricklefs (1993), Schwarz (1994), Southwood and Flanagan (1983), and Vatikiotis (1993).

<sup>2</sup> For accounts of the killings and discussion of historiographic problems, see the collection of essays in Cribb (1990), Robert Hefner’s material on highland East Java (1990), and the epilogue to James Siegel’s *Shadow and Sound* (1979:267–82). See, too, the summaries by Crouch (1978) and Ricklefs (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Pancasila are the Five Principles which guide the Republic and its citizenry: belief in one supreme God, justice and civility among peoples, the unity of Indonesia, democracy through deliberation and consensus among representatives, and social justice for all.

reform. I have told of its violent birth here neither to anticipate a broad political critique nor to reexamine the regime's rise to power but to begin a story having to do with the production and reception of Indonesian art since 1965. In that year, the political differences and cultural polemics that shaped two decades of post-independence Indonesian art fell mute with the collapse of the left. Artwork in the New Order era cannot risk having an explicit political brief, except in those instances where it can demonstrate its conformity with Pancasila or present itself as an aesthetic advance in keeping with the country's interest in development of all kinds. As John Pemberton (1994:258) observed recently, the distinction between culture and politics is essential to New Order rule. Clifford Geertz (1990) has made much the same point: Social differences related to class, religion, and ethnicity have been driven into practices and institutions "that can be represented as non-political" (1990:79). In this place where cultural practices are supposed to undergo development and yet stay indifferent to power, ideology, to quote Geertz (1990:79) "must be made to look like art without art being made to look like ideology."<sup>4</sup>

It thus falls largely to the state ministries, the bureaucratic apparatus, and the patronage of those on the inside of the regime to set the possibilities and limits of Indonesian art and Indonesian cultural production more generally. Committed to what is called the "guided development" of cultural life at national and regional levels, the government has been instrumental in setting up museums, academies, cultural centers, urban art councils, festivals, public competitions, conferences, shows, and tours. Although the growth of the urban elite and an emerging middle class have brought about an increase in the number of private galleries, private collectors, and corporate sponsors, the government remains the most significant promoter and patron of the arts.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, the government has established the dominant institutional contexts for artistic discipline, judgment, recognition, and desire. It is in these contexts that making art, absorbing the right influences, and indulging artistic ambitions gain legitimacy and pragmatic outlet. It is here that styles and ideas about art are brought into line with cultural policy and Pancasila ideology.

If artists have acquiesced to these institutions while taking advantage of

<sup>4</sup> I should be careful to note that Pemberton and Geertz work within very different theoretical precincts on the matter of culture. Pemberton's embrace of Foucault inclines him to treat discourses about culture as a way to transcend or efface machineries of power. He is thus suspicious of Geertz's hermeneutic approach to culture and goes so far as to link the "culturalist" orientations of Geertz and the discipline of anthropology at large to the repressive rhetoric of tradition advanced by the Soeharto regime to rewrite its origins and history (Pemberton 1994: 7-25). That said, Pemberton and Geertz appear to me to be in accord in their grasp of the regime's interest in distinguishing culture and politics.

<sup>5</sup> For a quick overview of New Order exhibitionary spaces, see Holt (1970), Agus Dermawan T. (1990), and the excellent appendices in Wright (1994). A study with special relevance for this paper is Hill (1993). See, too, the excellent essay by Philip Yampolsky (1995) regarding official government views on culture.

them, their work hardly can be expected to be very critical of the regime. The boundaries and direction of their art may shift or “develop,” as they say, but their work will usually show the signature of the ambitions and self-censorship learned in their institutional apprenticeships. Controversial works and statements about art and Indonesian society do get made and discussed but are constrained by an “atmosphere of extreme caution” (Miklouho–Maklai 1991:3).<sup>6</sup> In cases where artists or galleries step daringly beyond ideological limits, patronage and support can be withdrawn, and the spectre of censure and arrest raised.<sup>7</sup> Above all, the state cannot allow art to call into question the official views of September 1965. The myth of righteous violence and national rescue, so basic to the origins and legitimacy of the New Order, is intended for commemoration, not critique. And that myth is invoked to police the ideological limits of cultural activity and Indonesian citizenship more generally.<sup>8</sup>

A terrible fury fell upon artists and writers of the left after 1965. Prominent figures like painter Hendra Gunawan and novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer spent decades in prison or under restrictions, suffering what Pramoedya has succinctly and justly called a “theft of rights” (Toer 1992). Others with no ties to the left before that year show a real ambivalence about the possibilities of expression in the New Order. Some, such as writer and editor Goenawan Mohamad (1993), have come to think of culture as a “mechanism for trauma” and a product of social dislocation. Still others, no doubt mindful and fearful of the state, do everything they can to thrive. In this atmosphere, efforts to recuperate interest and respect for the socially engaged painting of the Indonesian left, or to explore the violence of 1965 understandably arouse suspicion and troubling political memories. Indeed, a sustained and public look at contemporary painting and its relationship to the traumas that gave birth to the New Order can hardly come from within Indonesia’s current art establishment.

<sup>6</sup> As noted by A. D. Pirous and Setiawan Sabana (1995), the current Indonesian art world has experienced a rise in social-political consciousness that has encouraged “critical attitudes towards home politics.” But these critical attitudes usually coalesce around social and environmental concerns rather than explicit political challenges to the New Order. As an example of the most daring kind of work being done under New Order constraints, one might point to the controversial 1995 exhibition on “Land Issues” (*Perkara Tanah*) by Dadang Christianto, which alluded to systemic violence in Indonesia (Wright 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai’s *Exposing Society’s Wounds* (1991), for discussion of the crackdowns, interventions, and pressures brought upon the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (The Indonesian New Art Movement) during the 1970s and early 1980s. See, too, general comments on New Order censorship by Virginia Matheson Hooker and Howard Dick (1993).

<sup>8</sup> For recent commentaries, see Laber (1997) and the suggestive and discerning essay by Hermawan Sulistyio (1995), “The Making of History: The State’s Role in the Shaping of Mass Consciousness of the Indonesian Uprisings of 1965–1966.” Sulistyio details the way in which the state security apparatus requires citizens to account not only for their activity with respect to the September Thirtieth Movement but for the involvement or non-involvement of their relatives and circle of associates as well.

Repressed memories of the violence, condemned as they are to silence and invisibility, pose real difficulties for Indonesian artists, art historians, and art critics. Because it must be evaded both in painting and in talk about painting, this remembered violence has the potential to function as a negative determinant of expressed works and histories. Writing about oppositional practices in regimented societies, Ross Chambers (1991:6–10) reminds us that the repressed must come back in transfigured form, often as part of a set of tactics and improvisations needed to make a repressive system livable. In such contexts, disguise, invisibility, silence, and ambiguity are crucial to the success of oppositional projects and evasions, as subjects pursue ways to avoid direct challenge to repressive or dominant authorities.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, authoritarian political systems—like the New Order—may regard certain oppositional practices as outright political resistance. Seen in this light, making, displaying, and talking about art in Indonesia are perhaps always concerned with finding “room for maneuver” between repression and co-optation (Chambers 1991:3).

For the time being, openly critical or dissident readings of Indonesian art and art history will more likely be found in the work of critics and scholars from abroad. Brought into tension with the prevailing art discourses of Indonesia, these readings underscore the futility of thinking of politics and culture as distinct and unentangled human projects. But we may ask: How will this scholarship bring across the silence and ambiguity of New Order art and depict the way New Order artists look for room to maneuver? How will it acknowledge uncertainty? How will it understand those who manage to paint or even thrive as artists in the shadows of political violence? I pose these questions not only to others, but to myself as well, for I am trying to proceed with an interpretive history of an early New Order painting after having come up against two strikingly divergent and fluctuating views of the work—one from the artist, Indonesian painter A. D. Pirous; the other from an art historian trained at Cornell, Astri Wright. The painting, completed in 1968, is called *Mentari Setelah September 1965* (*The Sun after September 1965*; see Plate 1) and is striking, not so much because of its image but because its title makes a rare and explicit reference to the moment that the Indonesian left came into peril. The key task of this essay, then, is to redraw the troubled and ambiguous connections between the anticommunist massacres of 1965 and New Order art by divulging shifting perspectives in the production and display of this painting. I should stress that I am not trying to come up with a settled or corrected account of the painting’s “meaning.” An intervention of that kind seems at best a fruitless and preemptive curatorial move that dreams of restraining an open-ended interpretive future for the work in question. Yet a discussion of the unsettled and unsettling discourses surrounding the painting can throw

<sup>9</sup> See, Hooker and Dick (1993:5).

light on the dilemma of making art and art history while living with the memory of political violence and upheaval.

#### CRITICAL APPROPRIATIONS

The boom that has taken place in Indonesian contemporary art since the early 1980s has been accompanied by a reawakened interest in Indonesian art history among Western scholars.<sup>10</sup> Unlike their Indonesian colleagues, these art historians are in a position to make especially frank and morally engaged assessments of New Order art and the Soeharto regime. Not surprisingly, there is a supportive critical interest in (the generally young or overlooked) Indonesian artists who talk back to the Indonesian art establishment or who undertake activist stances on pressing social issues. The transnational solidarities linking activist painters, art historians, and curators are thus testimony to a politics of hope that envisions an end to the repressiveness of the New Order. At the same time, some of this art historical literature shows comparatively less interest in the ambivalence or ambiguous oppositional tactics of well-established artists. A desire to find recognizable gestures of political resistance, back talk, and social commitment in specific exhibits, works of art, or artists' statements occasionally obscures more modest (but no less complex) negotiations of meaning or significance (compare Ortner 1995; Wolff 1993:152) or results in ironic appropriations of works created with non-oppositional intent.

Commenting a few years ago on the New Order's suppression of dissident voices, art historian Astri Wright (1994:163) pointed out that Indonesia's silenced art world has been unable to respond cathartically to the bloodshed of 1965 and so come to terms with the events and traumatic memories of that time.<sup>11</sup> As her pioneering research has established so well, the absence of references in painting to the events of 1965 and the reluctance of many artists

<sup>10</sup> See Foulcher (1986), Maklai (1993), Miklouho-Maklai (1991), Spanjaard (1988, 1990, 1993), von der Borch (1988), and Wright (1994). I provide a general review of Wright's book in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (George 1995). I note that it has been women who have been in the forefront of recent Indonesian art historical enquiry produced outside of Indonesia. This suggests to me a convergence of emerging disciplinary trends, in which both women and Southeast Asia are coming in from the periphery of art historical discourse. Art history produced *within* Indonesia remains largely a male pursuit.

<sup>11</sup> Wright (1994:163) remarks that there has been no public occasion in Indonesia for a "speaking bitterness" such as that which took place in the People's Republic of China at the close of the Cultural Revolution. Yet it seems to me unhelpful to contrast the public accounts of violence following China's Cultural Revolution with the New Order's efforts to suppress dissident views regarding the events of 1965 and 1966. As Rubie Watson (1994), Lisa Rofel (1991), Tianshu Pan (1995) and Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman (1994) all point out, "speaking bitterness" was policed so as to create an authorized "public transcript" that placed blame on the Gang of Four while exonerating the Party and the state. In connection, Kleinman and Kleinman (1994:714) remind us that "bitter memories, hatred of leaders and coworkers, burning grievances, and inflamed traumas were all officially suppressed." Indeed, as Watson (1994:12) puts it, the personal "cultural revolutions" of the Chinese remain unfinished business. We should be careful not to forget that the regimes in China and Indonesia each conjure a single authorized version of the past that offers only limited and select forms of catharsis to their respective citizens.

to discuss those times are a clear measure of the government's repressive guidance of political and cultural expression. The memory and continued threat of violence set the creative possibilities of contemporary Indonesian art and so limit the scope of art historical enquiry. Nonetheless, Wright identified Pirous's painting, *The Sun after September 1965*, as a canvas that perhaps spoke out against the climate of silence and fear surrounding the painful memories of the anticommunist massacres. About this painting, she wrote only briefly and in understandably speculative tones, remarking:

A rare exception to this silence might be found in a painting by A. D. Pirous entitled *The Sun after September 1965*. [black and white plate provided in the original]. This work consists of abstracted, cubistic figures, seemingly both men and women in draped clothing, their faces turned down towards the earth, away from the large, looming disk of the sun immediately behind them.

It is important for someone from the northern hemisphere to bear in mind the different perception of the sun that prevails in the tropics. This is not the source of light towards which we eagerly turn winter-pale faces to soak up warmth and vitamins; it is a potentially destructive force from which one seeks shelter. It is this sense one gets from Pirous's painting (Wright 1994:163).

In this passage, Wright is doing several things with the painting. Most obviously, she discovers and translates for her readers a visual language of dissent in the form of this work and in this sense installs the canvas within a critique of the Soeharto regime. Indeed, no gallery (O'Doherty 1986), no exhibition (Luke 1992), no scholarly or critical edition (McGann 1991) is ever neutral; and for this reason, Wright's critical appropriation of the painting—no matter how speculative or hedged—should be treated as a “show of force” and understood in political terms.

Pirous's work here potentially stands in for everything that has been repressed in New Order art regarding the political upheaval of 1965–66. In interpreting the disc-like form in the upper portion of the painting as a looming, oppressive sun, and finding downturned heads below it, Wright suggests that the work offers a scene of repression; and she juxtaposes that interpretation with her discussion of catharsis and memories of traumatic violence. The speculative tone of her remarks perhaps admits a struggle with the ambiguities that inevitably arise when an abstract image is treated as a representation of the world. What convinces a viewer that the painting comments on the violence of 1965? Or that it renders a scene of repression? What would such an interpretation imply about Pirous's intentions and artistic subjectivity? How is it that the regime has overlooked the canvas? These questions notwithstanding, the painting is offered as a dissident work and instrumentalized to make viewers cognizant of New Order terrors.

I suspect that a politics of hope led Wright to look at this painting in the way that she did. That is to say, Wright's critical and moral outlook led her to the “sense one gets from Pirous's painting” and to see the scene of repression in



the work. The solidarities forged in her account of the painting are important: The presumed observer is not Indonesian, that is, not directly subject to the political constraints on art discourse in the New Order era.<sup>12</sup> Mobilizing the moral and political sympathies of this audience is important work, especially in fostering critical acknowledgment of political violence and oppression and in envisioning a more open political climate for artists in Indonesia. Were such a climate to appear, artists of conscience presumably might take up the cathartic soul-searching that is now so absent in Indonesia's public culture. For the time being, it is usually the foreign critic or art historian who has come forward, as a matter of conscience, to call direct attention to the silenced voices and victims of the New Order.

Wright has put forward a serious and compelling interpretation of Pirous's painting. Yet I do not look at *The Sun after September 1965* in this way. I know the painter; I have seen the canvas in question and have arrived at a very different understanding of the work and the circumstances behind and around it. Wright's account, inflected as it is by a mix of anguish and a politics of hope, construes the work's genealogy in a way that leads one to miss some key political and historical concerns. In fact, turning the painting into a figure of opposition requires a forgetfulness or neglect of the historical circumstances surrounding its production and past display. Doing so also runs the risk of flattening or homogenizing New Order time and overlooks different vantage points and responses of different Indonesian citizens vis-à-vis the violence of 1965. A far more complex and perhaps less-comforting story can be told about this painting and its relationship to the trauma that accompanied the birth of the Soeharto regime. In particular, it can give us lessons about opposition, ambivalence, uncertainty, and opportunity in the world of New Order art.

In maneuvering around Wright's views, I will make a case for looking at the canvas in a different way. The approach will not be more historical than Wright's—after all, she connects the painting to the tragic events of 1965 and to the cultural politics of the Soeharto regime. Yet I will tell a story in answer to a set of historical questions that seem to me fundamental for understanding a painting. To put just a few words into Edward Said's mouth and to then take

<sup>12</sup> In conjuring an anonymous someone whose gaze emanates from the North as the implied viewer, Wright no doubt wished to reach out and acquaint politically and culturally distant viewers with Indonesian art. In this she is no different than the majority of art historians, ethnographers, and others—myself included—who write about Indonesia principally for Western academic audiences. But Wright here distinguishes an extra-Indonesian “us” from an intra-Indonesian “them” on the basis of supposed differences in perceiving nature; the passage suggests that the normative Indonesian response to the painting turns upon presumed facts of perception in the tropics. Cultures, of course, “do not impose uniform cognitive and reflective equipment on individuals” (Baxandall 1985:107). Neither do environments. This strain of determinism in Wright's account would preclude a wide range of locally situated responses to sun imagery in this and other Indonesian paintings. And it obscures the postcolonial political-economic conditions which divide people into political and cultural citizenries. Indeed, it is the more general consequence of this determinism that gives me worry: Very simply, I think it conceals, or defeats interest in, the political and historical circumstances of any viewer's positioned outlook.

them back as my own: "Who [paints]? For whom is the [painting ] being done? In what circumstances? These it seems to me are the questions whose answers provide us with the ingredients making for a politics of interpretation" (Said 1983:135).

Said's approach to cultural activity poses the same sorts of questions that preoccupy Michael Baxandall (1972, 1985) in his discussions about the historical explanation of pictures and the notion of intention, or purposefulness. Purposefulness, for Baxandall, is not an historical state of mind or a set of mental events but a general feature of human rational action that links an object with its historical circumstances (1985:41–42).<sup>13</sup> I should emphasize that a notion of painterly intention does not anchor the interpretation of a canvas to the moment of its production in any absolute or limiting way. As both Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Shelly Errington (1989) remind us, all things have a social life that stretches forward from the moment of their making. Brought into new contexts of use, reception, and exchange, a painting accrues a deeply circumstanced interpretive history. I would add, too, that intentionality or purposefulness is never certain and clear but always subject to a reading or description of some kind. Precisely because of these socially exploitable uncertainties, I would agree with Stanley Fish (1989, 1994) that the pursuit of situated meanings cannot afford to leave intention out of the picture. This perspective, Fish explains (1994:183–6), does not require us to concede authority to an artist who stands in privileged relation to his or her intentions, works, or projects but does oblige us to construe painting or any other artistic practice as a situated and purposeful human activity.

This discussion brings me back to Wright's account and to some of the uncertainties it produces, for her remarks about the painting have the purpose of appropriating the work for a critical sketch of the Soeharto regime. Those same remarks leave one unsure as to what the artist had in mind when creating this work. Did Pirous intend this painting as a critical reflection on the oppressiveness of the New Order? Did repressed memories of the violence of 1965 spill out onto the canvas without his awareness or intent? Are the artist's intentions no longer relevant to the display or interpretation of this work? Questions and ambiguities of intent may never get resolved, especially in the context of repression and oppositional practice. But just for this reason, intentionality remains susceptible to politicization and necessary to an understanding of the artist looking for room for maneuver.

#### THE ARTIST AND HIS WORK

I have worked with Pirous for several years in acquainting myself with New Order cultural activity,<sup>14</sup> so let me begin my account, then, with some back-

<sup>13</sup> Baxandall's approach thus stands in contrast to those who treat intention as an inner state. See Rosen (1995) for a superb set of essays on intentionality as a social phenomenon.

<sup>14</sup> I have known Pirous since 1985, when I accompanied him on a tour of museums, galleries, and art schools in the United States. I began a collaborative project with him in 1992 concerning

ground on the painter himself, who is acknowledged as one of Indonesia's leading senior artists and who, since 1970 (and subsequent to making the work in question), has been instrumental in bringing Muslim aesthetics into prominence in contemporary Indonesian painting and printmaking. Abdul Djalil Pirous was born in Meulaboh, Aceh (on the island of Sumatra) on March 11, 1933. His parents were pious Muslims who enjoyed a comfortable and substantial income from trade, rents, and the profits from a rubber plantation. Very early in life Pirous helped his mother prepare inks, patterns, and fabric for the traditional Acehnese-Muslim embroidery called *kasab*. A decade later, during the national struggle for independence, Pirous joined *Tentara Pelajar* (the Student Military) and for two years drew propaganda posters for the anti-Dutch guerilla forces. By the beginning of 1950, Pirous began to expand his drawing skills in the North Sumatran city of Medan, where he assisted his brother in making book illustrations, Lebaran cards, illuminated certificates, and decorative paintings on commission. It was in Medan, too, that his drawings caught the eye of a high school art teacher who encouraged Pirous to study art at an advanced level. At the time, there were but two academies for training in art, one in Bandung and another in Yogyakarta. Pirous chose the former, enrolling in the Fine Arts Department at the Bandung Institute of Technology (*Institut Teknologi Bandung*, or *ITB*) in 1955. He has remained associated with the department and the school for the forty-two years since that time, as a student, staff assistant, faculty member, and senior professor and dean. Outside the academy, Pirous was part of the circle of artists who gathered at Bandung's *Sanggar Seniman* (The Artists' Studio). He exhibited with them in 1959, 1960, and 1961, and for a brief time even assumed leadership of the studio. But his principal training took place at ITB, and it is there that during the 1970s he emerged, along with Ahmad Sadali, Abay Subarna, and others with a distinctly modernist, international, and Muslim vision of art.

In coming to Bandung, Pirous brought with him years of practice in religious iconography and lettering, a strong graphic sense, and a familiarity with commercial and decorative arts. What he encountered was a program (founded by the Dutch painter, Ries Mulder) aimed at inspiring students with modernist and international approaches to art, most notably cubist and abstract styles derived from Jacques Villon, as well as a vocabulary that blended formalism with humanist ideology. But Pirous also found himself stepping into a sharp ideological and institutional rivalry between the academies at Bandung and Yogyakarta. The ideological dimensions of this rivalry go back to the cultural polemics of the 1930s and had to do with the

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Indonesian Islamic art and the reawakening of an Indonesian Muslim art public. While pursuing that project I lived with him and his family for several months in 1994. The information that follows comes from my interviews with Pirous, from the artist's biography prepared by Buchari and Yuliman (1985), and from the biographical sketch prepared by Spanjaard (1988).

clash between nationalism and internationalism (Foulcher 1986; Holt 1967, 1970; Spanjaard 1990, 1993). To give but a very simple picture of this important controversy—termed the “Great Debate” by Claire Holt (1967)—Indonesians differed in their vision of what postcolonial independence would involve. For those in the arts, there was a real anxiety about how Indonesian-ness and Western cultural imperialism would show themselves. Some were inclined to see art as a vehicle for liberal and international humanist values that could take root in Indonesia and perhaps take on an Indonesian character. Others insisted that art should play a part in forging a socialist nation free of colonial dominion. In their view, art had to serve the quest for a national cultural identity and a just society. To this end, art should acquire a populist appeal, promote class consciousness, strive against imperialism, and reveal a true national character.

The Bandung school debuted the work of its painters at the *Balai Budaya* (Cultural Hall) in Jakarta in 1954, just a year before Pirous began his art studies. Critic and painter Trisno Sumardjo blasted the exhibition in an article entitled, “Bandung is the Slave of the Western Laboratory,” declaring the paintings to be the “bloodless” and “artificial” works of those who had fallen victim to modernism (cited in Spanjaard 1990:55). Writer and poet Sitor Situmorang was equally harsh in his denunciation of the Bandung artists. In his view, the modernist and formalist approaches so typical of the Bandung group had no purpose in the realm of Indonesian culture; pursuing such styles had only led the artists to reproduce the bourgeois fashions of the West in a series of works with no vision or substance (Spanjaard 1990:56). The negative critical response to the 1954 *Balai Budaya* show was no doubt a disappointment to the Bandung artists but does seem not to have shaken their sense of purpose or the thrust of their subsequent work. They continued their personal experiments in abstraction and turned out innumerable still lifes, landscapes, and figure studies, most of which reflect a studied approach to the planes, weights, and geometries of composition, and to the use of color contrasts. Subject matter and meaning were ancillary to a cool intellectualism and the painters’ grasp of formal concerns.

Bandung’s art seemed cold, elitist, and irrelevant to the more nationalistic artists at the academy and studios of Yogyakarta. Although the Yogya artists worked in realist or expressionist styles derived from the West, the subject matter of their painting allied them with those who wanted to free Indonesian political and cultural life from foreign dominion. Compared to their contemporaries in Bandung, the Yogya artists had little in the way of technical or stylistic discipline but were exuberant in their embrace of the people, the land, or anything that could be conjured as authentically and indigenously Indonesian. As Claire Holt (1967:232) acutely observed, the Yogya painters usually insisted on the social significance of a work of art and in this regard held themselves out as moral actors and citizens in the new nation. This stress on

national identity and social conscience was hardly absent at Bandung but clearly dominated the work and the critical judgment of the Yogya artists.

It was in this climate of debate that Pirous began his advanced training, and his sympathies rapidly quickened around those of his teachers and peers at Bandung. That debate was brought to resolution, however, in August 1959, when President Sukarno proclaimed a new state doctrine, *Manipol-Usdek*, which put stress on national identity and thereby set the development of a national-oriented art as the principal direction for aesthetic expression (Holt 1967:248).<sup>15</sup> The same year also saw the growing vigor and influence of the leftist cultural institute, LEKRA (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*, or The Institute of People's Culture). For almost a decade, LEKRA had played a key role in the national cultural debates and had done well in recruiting painters and sculptors through a generous program of patronage aimed at giving artists organizational and financial support networks (Foulcher 1986:42). By 1959 the institute saw itself as a leader in an Indonesian cultural revolution and realigned its efforts and theoretical outlook accordingly. Although LEKRA had consistently embraced socialist realism, new strains of a Maoist "revolutionary romanticism" began to appeal to the LEKRA leadership and gave birth to a fresh set of slogans intended for cultural activities that would engage and lead the proletarian and peasant masses.<sup>16</sup> The LEKRA initiative meshed very well with Sukarno's political manifesto and during the next five years attracted a huge number of artists. At the same time, the initiative became increasingly identified or linked with the interests of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

While the academy and studios at Yogya took a real interest in the LEKRA initiative, the Bandung school did not. As the pressure to create a politically correct art grew, many of its artists retreated from exhibiting their work in public. Among them was Pirous. When I asked him what he did during this time, he replied:

I just taught. Watched out for myself. Just taught and painted at home. . . . I never exhibited. I wasn't brave enough [*Interview*, May 11, 1994].

On Independence Day, August 17, 1963, twenty-one writers and artists seeking a more open ideological climate for their work signed a cultural manifesto known as *Manikebu* (Manifesto Kebudayaan). The manifesto circulated in Bandung, and several of the younger artists added their signatures. Pirous signed, as did student painter Erna Garnasih, who would later become his

<sup>15</sup> *Manipol-Usdek* is an acronym for "Political Manifesto: The Constitution of 1945; Indonesian Socialism; Guided Democracy; Guided Economy; and National Identity."

<sup>16</sup> The chief slogans were: "Politics is the Commander" (*Politik adalah Panglima*), "Moving Down" (*Turun ke Bawah*), and the "Five Combinations" (going wide and going high; a high ideological quality and a high artistic quality; positive tradition and the revolutionary present; individual creativity and the skills of the masses; socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism). See Foulcher (1986:105–13).

wife. But not long afterward, in 1964, Sukarno banned the manifesto. As Pirous tells the story:

Suddenly, we were aware that this was a very strict political game taking place at the highest levels. They [LEKRA members] were involved in intrigue. We couldn't do much of anything beyond the declared [guidelines] . . . I didn't want to play politics. I didn't want to involve my creative work with politics [*Interview*, May 8, 1994].

Another artist with whom Pirous was friends came from Yogya, trying to talk him into joining LEKRA or the communist CGMI (Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia, or Indonesian Student Movement Concentration):

He came and said to me "Pirous, on a road like this, no way. You have to become one of the party. . . ." I said "No, I want to become a painter, period. I do not want to become involved in politics." He made fun of me then, I remember it very well [*Interview*, May 8, 1994].

I stayed away. . . . I didn't want to paint those themes [of struggle]. But I couldn't say "No" publically. If I said "No" it meant baring my chest and getting hit. [So I] had to be quiet like that, right? . . . It really was a chaotic time [*Interview* May 11, 1994].

Still another painter—this one from Bandung—confronted him:

"Pirous, are you painting in neocolonial and imperialist styles?" Those were the words he used. That was the language LEKRA used for striking at the paintings that were out of line with socialist realism. . . . I never exhibited. I wasn't brave enough. Because if there was an attack, I was attacked first, then my institution. My institution. . . . As a staff member. "Pirous, his paintings are like this and this. He is a neocolonial and imperialist painter." "Who is Pirous?" "Pirous, why he is a staff instructor at the school." "Well, if it's like that the school has to be closed. That is very simple." It got like that, so I didn't exhibit [*Interview* May 11, 1994].<sup>17</sup>

Following Foulcher in his historical account of LEKRA (1986), both Wright (1994:172) and art historian Brita Maklai (1993:71) have argued that in the Indonesian context, socialist realism was relatively free of demands when it came to method, style, or content. LEKRA only required a pro-*rakyat* (a pro-people) outlook or "state of mind" (Foulcher 1986:25–26). Writing in the wake of the 1965 massacres and more than a little critical of the Bandung school's hegemony over contemporary visual art in the New Order period, Wright and Maklai play down the restrictiveness of LEKRA and its aesthetic philosophy. Certainly there is nothing in this aesthetic philosophy that should have warranted the murder or arrest of leftist artists in 1965 and 1966 or the suppression of dissident or socially engaged art thereafter. And as Wright

<sup>17</sup> Compare an account that Pirous offered to Astri Wright (1994:172–3) in a 1988 interview: "the situation was very heavy; clouds, darker and darker, were hanging over our heads, all the paintings should be social realist, even in Bandung. . . . the door was getting tighter and tighter, closing our possibilities of exploring modern art, and of making abstract painting. It's not that it was not *allowed*, but there was no place for it. . . . I felt afraid to show my own work! I felt afraid to show in exhibitions, because the critics would point out that this is 'imperialistic painting' and this is done by a painter from the Bandung school, so the Bandung school should be closed! . . . It was a very, very touchy and very frightening situation."

(1994:173) accurately points out, being a member of LEKRA was not synonymous with being a communist. Nonetheless, we need to imagine or recall the climate of the Indonesian art world in 1964. The fact that LEKRA remained ambiguous about matters of style, method, or content meant that virtually anyone or anything could be criticized for not showing a pro-rakyat state of mind. I want to suggest that this ambiguity and LEKRA's ability to exploit it were—for those who remained outside the organization's membership, patronage, and ideological orbit—as terrifying and constraining as any set of explicit aesthetic restrictions.

The picture we have of Pirous in September, 1965, then, shows a young artist who is afraid to exhibit. He sees his creative work as intensely personal, and tries—quite stubbornly—to keep politics out of his paintings, even as politics swallows them up.<sup>18</sup> Consulting the catalogue that accompanied his 1985 Retrospective Exhibition (Buchari and Yuliman 1985), we see little other than still lifes, landscapes, childrens' portraits, flowers, and some village scenes in his work from 1958 through 1965, all of it done in a spirit of formal or abstract experimentation. At the same time, Pirous sees himself very much as part of a school that has come under increasing criticism and censure. In a sense, the school and Pirous are extensions and reflections of one another, not only with regard to artistic practice and outlook as such but with respect to the moral community made up of teachers, students, and peers as well.

Keeping politics out of painting is, however, a political tactic in itself. Pirous's pursuit of the intense subjectivity and formal play associated with modernist aesthetics remained inextricably tied to the political choices he had to confront in the mid-sixties. To have pursued an apolitical art does not mean that Pirous was politically naïve, nor does it mean that he was ignorant of the political fate that can befall or summon forth art. Adopting a view that would presage the New Order separation of politics and culture, he made a distinction between Pirous the citizen and Pirous the artist. Relevant here, too, is his 1964 thesis, which dealt with poster art as a tool of political struggle (Pirous 1964). Pirous, then, was prepared to acknowledge that politics could inspire or make use of art. Yet his absorption with modernist aesthetics represented an almost spiritual pursuit of the transcendent and the sublime, even while it constituted—along with his decision not to exhibit—an alert and perhaps calculated oppositional maneuver against the doctrinaire political forces that threatened his institution and his teachers.

#### THE SUN AFTER SEPTEMBER 1965

The weeks and months following the failed September putsch were ones of violence and uncertainty. As Soeharto consolidated his authority and took the

<sup>18</sup> This theme has also appeared in Indonesian fiction. See Foulcher (1990) for a summary of Ajip Rosidi's novel, *Anak Tanahair, Secercah Kisah* (Child of the Homeland, a Story), in which two characters, painters Ardi and Hasan, struggle with the politicization of the arts in the late Sukarno years.

first steps to fashion a new regime in 1966, the Bandung artists were quick to appreciate and take advantage of the changed political climate and the emerging possibilities for support and patronage.<sup>19</sup> LEKRA had been outlawed in October 1965, just as the deadly purge of the left began; and many painters associated with the academy and studios in Yogyakarta were killed, imprisoned, or under suspicion and without real prospects for exhibiting their work. Seeing the time was right for a comeback, Bandung mounted a major show at the Balai Budaya in Jakarta with endorsements from Ali Sadikin, the new Governor of Jakarta, and from Djukardi, the Mayor of Bandung. Held from December 13 through the 22, 1966, and called simply, *Sebelas Seniman Bandung* (Eleven Bandung Artists), the show heralded the arrival of an aesthetic regime unlike the one of the LEKRA years. Alluding to the time Bandung had been out of favor, the pamphlet from the show carried the following statement, in English<sup>20</sup>:

The purpose of this exhibition is to revive the interest of the audience in the works of the Bandung people who once again are able to introduce themselves, as they did in 1954 and 1958 at this same hall, Balai Budaya, Jakarta. This exhibition differs from the previous in that now graphic works and sculptures are presented in addition to oil paintings. But the greatest difference of course lies in the manifestation itself, since a work of art is a means of communication[,] is the effort of a man to reach out to his fellow man; it is an experiment created by an artist as a response to life. This response grows with his age, experience, and education. A work of art stands on its own merit, and, as does its creator, lives its own life. The struggle of every artist is to find himself.

The show was a breakthrough and not only because of its critical success. Indeed, in retrospect we see that the show was instrumental in establishing Bandung and its artists as the ascendant force in New Order exhibitionary space. Influence, patronage, and the privilege to judge and to be recognized were theirs—and has remained theirs for three decades.

Pirous took part as a junior artist in this show and keenly recalls the change of climate. He told me that the first year of the New Order:

also brought a new wind, a new spirit, to our school at ITB. There was a new atmosphere, an atmosphere free from the handcuffs of that dark, gloomy situation. . . . The constraints not only applied to individuals but to the school as well. . . . This freedom spurred us to work again with purpose. . . . We had arrived. We [had] to show the world again that we still [existed] and that we were firmly in a situation that was developing and growing. . . . It wasn't necessary to be afraid of LEKRA and its association with social realism. . . . There was no need to be afraid of being called neocolonial and imperialistic [*Interview*, May 15, 1994].

During the same year, 1966, Pirous would complete the first of two paintings with celebratory and politically inflected titles. Called *Reaching for Free-*

<sup>19</sup> For a glimpse at the art world of the early New Order, see Holt (1970) and Miklouho-Maklai (1991).

<sup>20</sup> Most art collectors in Jakarta at this time were foreigners. The use of English was essential in reaching out to collectors from abroad.



dom (*Menggapai Kebebasan*, 120 × 75 cm, oil on canvas; see Plate 2), it is done in a bold expressionist style. The work was not among those shown in the Balai Budaya exhibit, but Pirous recalls it as “a personal expression of independence, an openness, a freedom . . . in the field of art” (*Interview*, May 15, 1994). Judging by the listings prepared for the artist’s retrospective catalog, the political changes going on in Indonesia were indeed very liberating for Pirous. In 1965, he completed but 8 paintings. In 1966 he produced 18, and showed 5 of them in the Eleven Bandung Artists exhibition. In 1967, he turned out 20 canvases and took part in two shows—a government-sponsored show in Thailand called “Unseen Contemporary Indonesian Painting” and a three-man exhibit in Jakarta with Bandung painter Kaboel Soeadi and sculptor Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo. For 1968 there are no less than 54 paintings. That was the year he held what he considers to be his first solo show at the Balai Budaya in Jakarta. It was also the year he painted *The Sun after September 1965*, the second and last of his canvases to carry a politically suggestive title, and the only one to make direct reference to the events of 1965.<sup>21</sup>

The show, called “Dharta/Pirous: An Exhibit of Sculpture and Painting by Two of the Eleven Bandung Artists,” took place in early October 1968. Taking advantage of their association with Bandung, Pirous and sculptor Sidharta put together a collaborative exhibit for their work: Dharta would have the floor; and Pirous, the walls. Pirous’s collection numbered forty-two works and featured *The Sun after September 1965* as its focal piece. The work, measuring 1.35 × 1.5 meters, was the largest in the collection, and was positioned as the visual focus of the exhibition space. As Pirous tells it:

this one was a primadonna on the walls. . . . This was the centerpoint of all my paintings, okay? . . . That is my focus. So, all these paintings were there as [an expression of] gratitude, really, concerning the situation. All of those paintings. Perhaps they were shown in that elaborate way since it was clearly no longer the time before '65. This only was possible after '65, okay? . . . This painting, *September* here, was the focus of the room . . . the biggest painting in that space [*Interview*, May 11, 1994].

If its size and manner of display helped draw attention to the painting, so did its reproduction in the show’s pamphlet. The brochure’s sole photograph of

<sup>21</sup> Wright (1994:164) identifies *The Sun after September 1965* as a work that predates 1967, based on notations taken from the Claire Holt Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts: The black-and-white reproduction of the painting shown in her book is credited to that collection. Most of the photographs of Indonesian paintings in Claire Holt Collection are on contact sheets, so it would be difficult to make out the date on the canvas. If the photograph was taken by Holt, it would in all likelihood have to date from her six-week visit to Indonesia in early 1969, a visit taken after a twelve-year absence (Holt 1970:163). I have examined the actual canvas and seen that it bears the date 1968. For this reason, I think an archival error may have been made. I note that Wright’s description of the painting, above, makes no mention of color. Working with a black-and-white reproduction of the painting, rather than a color one, seemed to me one of the key factors in Wright’s response to the canvas.



PLATE 1. *The Sun after September 1965*. Removed from storage and photographed by the author at Serambi Pirous, Bandung, May, 1994. By permission of the artist.



PLATE 2. *Reaching for Freedom*. Reprinted image from the exhibition catalogue prepared for, "A. D. Pirous: Painting, Etching, and Serigraphy 1960–1985," Jakarta, October, 1985. By permission of the artist.

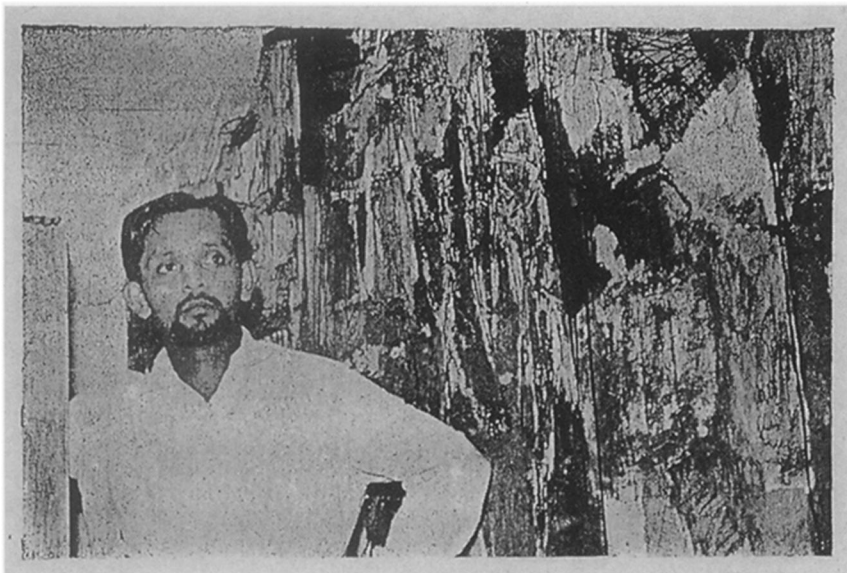


PLATE 3. Photograph of A. D. Pirous standing in front of *The Sun after September 1965*. Photocopied and reprinted image from the exhibition pamphlet prepared for "Dharta/Pirous: An Exhibit of Sculpture and Painting by Two of the Eleven Bandung Artists," Jakarta, October, 1968. By permission of the artist. (The angle and framing of the original camera shot, and the poor photocopy of the surviving image make the painting difficult to recognize.)

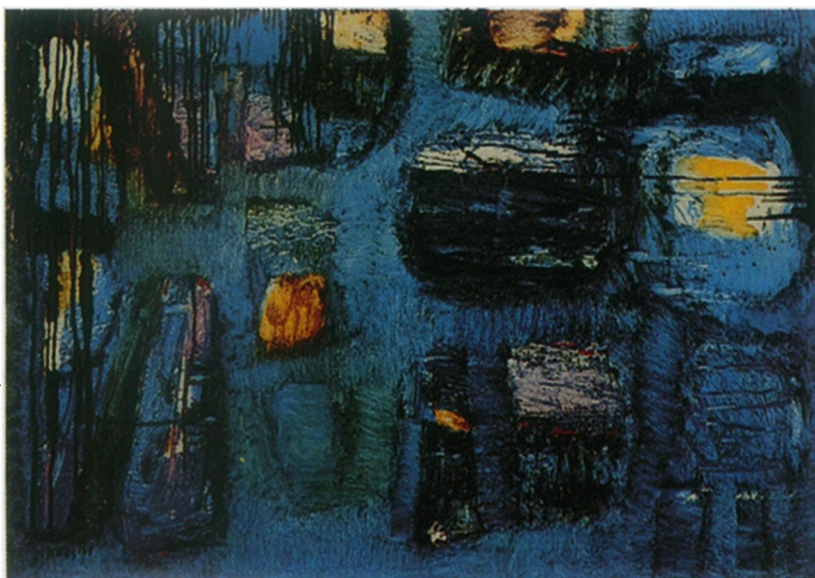


PLATE 4. *Night Landscape I*. Reprinted image from the exhibition catalogue prepared for, A. D. Pirous: *Painting, Etching, and Serigraphy 1960–1985*," Jakarta, October, 1985. By permission of the artist.



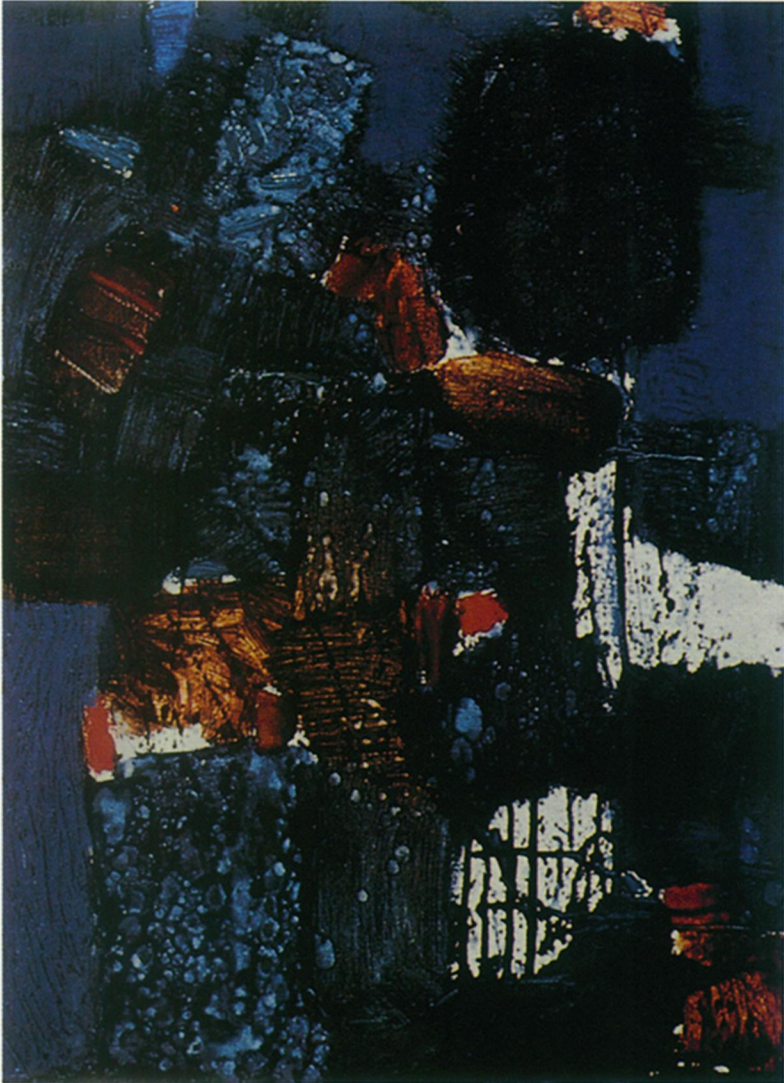


PLATE 5. *An Isolated Place*. Reprinted image from the exhibition catalogue prepared for, "A. D. Pirous: Painting, Etching, and Serigraphy 1960–1985," Jakarta, October, 1985. By permission of the artist.

the artist or his work shows Pirous standing in front of *The Sun after September 1965* (see Plate 3).

Who saw *The Sun after September 1965* in that Jakarta show? Pirous recalls diplomats and embassy staff members from Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States, along with guests and officials from the emerging cultural scene in Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta. Paul Kaaris, the Charges-de-Affair from Denmark, opened the Dharta/Pirous exhibit; and three people came forward with fellowship offers to study in their respective countries. Before the evening was out, Pirous had sold fifteen of his paintings; he would sell over half by the time the show closed five days later. *The Sun after September 1965*, however, was not and has never been for sale. Pirous retains it in his private collection. Indeed, but when I pressed Pirous about the significance of this painting, he said:

Why that? It's a commemoration of this, this sun that is carrying happiness after '65. . . . It's a spiritual, what do you call it, just my spiritual notes, my spiritual recording. [Interview, May 11, 1994]

I mentioned to him that the painting could be viewed as an allusion to the oppressiveness of the New Order. He replied that *The Sun after September 1965* showed "no gloom, no depression after '66, but just the opposite, a joy, yeah?"

But what about the figures, the men and women in draped clothing, "their faces turned down towards the earth." Pirous protested that no figures inhabited the painting; it was a landscape. I asked him to talk about the imagery and the way the canvas is painted (see Plate 1). He reached for the catalog from his 1985 retrospective exhibition to show me a color reproduction of the painting and to find some other comparable works. The years immediately after 1965 saw Pirous experimenting with textures created by dripping, splashing, and brushing thin mixtures of oil paint and turpentine onto canvas. In particular he was going for a certain playfulness and tension between materials and the eye, trying to create a thick visual texture with thin paint, sometimes in contrast with ridges of impasto. Opening the catalog, he pointed to a reproduction of a 1968 painting called *The Night Landscape I* (*Pemandangan Malam I*, 135 × 100 cm, oil on canvas; see Plate 4), a work shown in the Dharta/Pirous exhibit:

You see the form? These are not figures, this is a landscape, you see? You see? This is landscape. Yes these forms, although they are round doesn't mean they are heads. That is my visual language at that time.

He pointed to another reproduction on the opposite page of the catalog, this one of a 1968 painting called *An Isolated Place* (*Daerah Terpencil*, 60 × 40 cm, oil on canvas; see Plate 5), a canvas also shown in Pirous's Jakarta exhibit: "Same year, all of these. The same. So, there aren't any figures here."

In our conversation, however, the painter went on to insist that one is perfectly free to see figures or a landscape in *The Sun after September 1965*.

That did not matter. What bothered him was a finding a contrary political location for the work. Visual or aesthetic misprision was tolerable and, with respect to abstract painting, quite familiar. But political misprision crossed the boundaries of acceptable interpretation. As he put it in English, not Indonesian: "It is too much."<sup>22</sup>

#### POLITICS, INTERPRETATION, AND THE PASSING OF TIME

A critical art history should not be afraid to transgress the interpretive boundaries patrolled by artists or various art authorities. And as I remarked earlier in this study, we need not concede a privileged authority to the artist in interpreting his or her painting nor limit the significance of a work to its moment of origin. But we need to remember that it is not only curators and art critics but also regimes and ministries who routinely try to connect works of art to artists' intentions and, thus, to the political projects the works might serve. For this reason, acknowledging the positioned and often shifting intentions or purposes that coalesce around a painting and its display seem to me crucial for narrating and understanding a circumstanced history of the work. Just as no painting is "consumed by any single interpretation" (Fabian 1996: xi), no single reading of painterly intention can be expected to perdure in uncontested manner within the field of competing authorities and viewers. Nor are questions of intention limited to the artist or the circumstances of a work's birth. Rather, critical intentions haunt all responses to a painting and its display. That is to say, critics, art historians, ethnographers, curators, and ministries of culture all bring their own purposes and intentions to bear on the public apprehension of a work as they each seek to establish the validity and authority of their respective, joint, or complicit interpretations.

Nonetheless, the passing of time always threatens to destabilize such claims and to expose the ephemeral and contingent character of artistic or interpretive projects. Acknowledging the historicity of art works and art commentaries thereby makes it possible to capture irony, ambivalence, and rupture in the social life of images. As Shelly Errington (1989:49) has remarked, "Meanings are not intrinsic to objects but are attributed to them in the course of human thought and practices" and, because of this, objects, and works of art in particular "can change meanings in the course of their 'lifetimes.'" Like Baxandall (1985) before her, Errington (1989:49–50) goes on to describe cultural and historical divides as the paradigmatic sites for the transformation of meaning. Whether those divides can be easily identified amid today's transnational flows of culture or from the vantage point of a postmodern era

<sup>22</sup> Our conversations took place in Indonesian and English. Codeswitching had as much to do with asserting authority and control within dialogue as it did with conversational play and repair, or with clarification. Here Pirous uses English in a possible bid to set the terms I must use to convey his stance. I hope to treat this matter in a subsequent study. For a recent and provocative set of reflections on ethnographic dialogues related to art and history, see Fabian (1996).

that is said to have either ended or recycled history is a problem I will not explore here. For now I simply note that insights about the way cultural and historical divides complicate interpretation, understanding, or “appreciation” do not help all that much in looking at the work of art as it survives or succumbs to the shifting political and ideological terrain of the present. More germane are analyses like those of Berthold Hinz (1970) and Otto Karl Werckmeister (1982), who have shown how art historians can appropriate works and invest them with features in keeping with the political and ideological moods of various regimes. Or to relate theater and cinema to the problem at hand, there are the fine studies of James Peacock (1968) and Krishna Sen (1991) that relate theater and cinema to the problem at hand have illuminated the political life of melodrama in Old and New Order Indonesia. These studies suggest that to confront the always difficult wedding of art and ideology, we have to attend to the situatedness of the moment in which art is displayed and received. In a sense, all art is installation art. The ideological valence of a work of art is conjunctural—if I may borrow terms used by Gerald Graff (1989:175). It does not belong to the work in and of itself, but exists as a function of how and where the work is displayed, reproduced, and remarked upon in ever-changing circumstances.

So far, I have placed a particular interpretation of Pirous’s painting into tension with the circumstances of the work’s birth. Its most recent appropriation as a dissident work offering a scene of New Order repression stands in striking contrast to its initial display as a bright landscape of New Order promise. If we assent to the painting’s use as a dissident work in this way, certain problems arise. As Pirous indicated, it is not a matter of whether one sees figures in the painting—in fact several people to whom I have shown a reproduction do. But the problem is one of seeing human figures in the painting and connecting them to a particular story of trauma, catharsis, and political opposition. How is it that Pirous would stand in front of his painting in 1968 and pose for a picture with a background lamenting the oppressiveness of the New Order? I would answer: not in those times, not in those circumstances. In finding draped figures with downturned heads inhabiting the splashes of paint on *The Sun after September 1965*, we perhaps need to persuade ourselves that a sublimated history has erupted onto the canvas. But did grief for the murdered left already haunt this painting in 1968? I think not. Nor did the canvas anticipate the oppressiveness of the New Order from some unpoliced precinct of aesthetic freedom. The exuberance of its planes and primary colors then suggested the positioned and hopeful outlook of someone who was at last finding a secure critical and commercial reception and who saw the collapse of the left as an emancipation of cultural and intellectual forces.<sup>23</sup>

Almost thirty years have gone by since Pirous painted this canvas, and in

<sup>23</sup> See Foulcher (1986:2–12) for an excellent discussion of the cultural and intellectual history being forged in Indonesia at this time.



that time the New Order has vilified the left, silenced nearly all dissent, and has never acknowledged the slaughter of 1965–66 as anything less than the rescue of a nation. Political sympathies may bring us to condemn the restrictions that New Order artists have endured, but it seems a serious and radical step to take Pirous's canvas and place it in protest to the silence that has fallen over Indonesia. Treating the work as a timeless or unsituated critique of official silence removes the painting from the conditions of its making and initial display and thus oddly reproduces the forgetfulness and ahistoricism that a critical stance toward the events and victims of 1965 should try to overcome.<sup>24</sup> Portraying *The Sun after September 1965* as an intrinsically dissident work in the 1990s makes it difficult for us to acknowledge the hopes of artists whose interests were initially advanced by the arrival of the Soeharto regime. Furthermore, it leads one to overlook the betrayal of the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto and the artists and writers of the Generation of '66 (*Angkatan '66*) who tolerated or were seduced by the political violence under the prospect of wider freedoms. For many, there was a time of promise and relief before what would become years of rigid conformity took root.

My point is that there is something to be gained by looking at the shifting and unfolding life of art works, artists, and regimes. Flattening or homogenizing New Order time, and the time of artists' works and lives, leaves us with little chance to understand how opportunities are pursued, how frustrations and repression are suffered, how oppositional stances are advanced or abandoned, and how memories of political violence are ignited or forgotten. *The Sun after September 1965* is a painting that was made and displayed to mark the change of regime in Indonesia and, with it, the change of one artist's future. Listening to Pirous's account, we see a painting that in 1968 deflected attention away from the violence of 1965–66 and toward aesthetic freedoms that had been denied to the artist in the last years of Sukarno's rule. But my work with Pirous also suggests that he has come to feel a certain ambivalence about this painting since it was first exhibited. Since 1970, *The Sun after September 1965* has largely been withheld from public view in Indonesia and abroad. In that year, a profound redirection occurred in Pirous's work which stemmed from his embrace of Islamic art, and he has gone on to projects of far more influence and significance than the canvas that has been the topic of this article. *The Sun after September 1965* was brought back to Jakarta in October 1985 as part of Pirous's retrospective exhibition of painting, etching, and serigraphy from the twenty-five year period reaching back to 1960.<sup>25</sup> It then was returned to Bandung, where it has remained out of public view. It presently rests in a storage room in Pirous's personal gallery, Serambi Pirous. He has never said so to me—I am not sure that he would or could—but the with-

<sup>24</sup> My thanks to Barbara McCloskey for pointing this out to me.

<sup>25</sup> The catalogue for the retrospective show (Buchari and Yuliman 1985) includes a color reproduction of the painting. No commentary is provided.

drawal of this painting from public view perhaps reveals the difficulty of standing by it in the way he once did. What and whose purposes would be served in exhibiting the painting except as an art work that belonged to the “there and then” of Bandung in 1968? It seems to me that the political and cultural conditions of New Order rule have come to eclipse the sunny politics of hope originally vested in the canvas.

So long as the actual canvas remains in storage, the public for this work of art will consist of those who see its color reproduction in the limited editions of the 1985 retrospective catalog, a reproduction that appears without commentary; its black-and-white reproduction in Wright’s 1994 survey of contemporary Indonesian art, accompanied by a discussion that opposes the original painting both to the circumstances of its birth and its present repose in a closet; or the reproduction included in this article. Pirous is planning to hold another retrospective show within the next few years; whether the canvas will be brought out of storage and given commentary has yet to be decided. Meanwhile, following some recent discussions with the artist, Astri Wright has stepped back from her speculative interpretation of *The Sun after September 1965* and has come to see the painting as a work that celebrates the end of the late Sukarno period (Wright, letter to the author, April 1996). Change and instability of this kind in the views of artists, art historians, curators, and discrepant art publics seem inevitable, especially as images and discourses are disseminated across national and ideological boundaries by print and mass media and as regimes rise and fall. In the face of these shifting and positioned views about Indonesian art and politics, there is need for careful ethnographic histories that can express and situate the dilemmas, opportunities, and uncertainties in making art and art history in the wake of political violence.

The story that Pirous has told about *The Sun after September 1965* places the painting well within the orbit of New Order sanctions on aesthetic expression. It is not an intrinsically dissident work, nor does it serve our critical understanding of Indonesian politics and art to situate it as if it were.<sup>26</sup> To the contrary, the work, Pirous’s recollections about the circumstances of its making, and his decision to retire the painting to storage—if only momentarily—all allude to the New Order in perhaps predictable, and even commonplace ways.<sup>27</sup> Pirous has never shown the painting in anguish over the violence of 1965 nor in reaction to the repressiveness of the Soeharto regime. Displayed in the wake of political upheaval, it once helped legitimate government sponsors who were being used by an artist and a school set on promoting a highly formal and international style. Retired to storage, its import is less clear. Its

<sup>26</sup> For an illuminating discussion about social critique, see Brook Thomas (1991), particularly his treatment of Althusser’s remarks on Balzac (Althusser 1971).

<sup>27</sup> Some may view Pirous’s account of *The Sun after September 1965*—an account upon which I have put significant emphasis—as a revisionist and hence unreliable statement made in line with current pressures to conform to the dominant order. I would counter that the New Order has left Pirous’s recollections intact.

place in a darkened closet, for example, suggests to me both disappointment and anxiety about the continued relevance or suitability of the painting in a thoroughly restrictive political atmosphere. Seeing this work of art as motivated and thwarted by the New Order, then, requires us to see that the dislocations and violence of 1965 and 1966 were not uniform in their effects. In the bloodshed and the stern order that followed, some tragically met their end, while others found their deliverance.

Wright's discussion of Pirous's canvas can be regarded as a significant intervention in the painting's social history, if only because of the way it privileges the work as a dissident project. Although that discussion runs against the grain of Pirous's account in key respects, both versions of the painting's sense spring from a struggle or a longing for artistic freedom. But because the artist and the art historian stand in different ideological and political precincts, their respective hopes and evasions clash in opposed narratives. In reflecting on his painting, Pirous evades the anticommunist violence of 1965 as one of the conditions that allowed him to work openly with abstraction and which restored a more positive future for his class, religious, and professional interests.<sup>28</sup> Nor does he reconcile the provocative title of the painting with his vow to remain out of politics. The exuberant subjectivity and obliviousness he locates in the abstract image are, at root, compliant with New Order pressures on aesthetic activity. The picture of gloom Wright once found in the painting is ironically one that Pirous sees when recollecting the last years of the Sukarno era. Seeing a dissident gesture in the image itself suggests some of the difficulty art historians or ministries of culture can produce in confronting ambiguity and abstraction. Anxieties and hopes are incessantly projected upon ambiguous works and deflected back in objectified images or forms that may serve discrepant or unanticipated political agendas. In the instance of seeing an oppressive sun and downturned heads is conjured a stubborn moral awareness of mass violence. But it is also an unmasking of those oppositional possibilities that cause the New Order regime to be anxious and watchful.

Just before Pirous and I finished talking about *The Sun after September 1965*, I wondered aloud to him whether Indonesian works of art would ever express grief for those who were killed or jailed in the reprisals of 1965 and 1966. He answered this way:

It probably will be a long time before that happens. If at some time the Soeharto government were to reach its peak and then fall apart, or if there are those who want to darken Indonesia's history with falsehoods, or with something that doesn't reflect the interests of the majority, [maybe then] paintings about those who were killed will make them heroes again. Isn't history always like that? But for now, that can't yet happen.

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<sup>28</sup> I do not have the space here to provide an account of how his Muslim trading-class background shaped his interest in art or his response to the violence of 1965.

Pirous, I hope I have made clear, has a vested interest in putting up with the way things have been dictated by the New Order. Yet his remarks about history also suggest its dangerousness and its disfiguring character (see Benjamin 1978; Dirks 1990). They should remind us that history making always threatens to disrupt the prevailing order and to bring together what Soeharto's government has tried to keep apart in public discourse—art and ideology, culture and politics. Indeed, a critical art history will include an effort to acknowledge those Indonesian artists who paint in a spirit of social engagement, and so stand as an alternative to any “official” history that would demonize their work. At the same time, Wright's initial speculations about *The Sun after September 1965* should also make us realize that the making of Indonesian art history is in significant measure out of the hands of Indonesians themselves. Contemporary Indonesian art history is already immersed in transnational flows of culture and cultural criticism and is, thus, susceptible to revisions emanating from afar.<sup>29</sup> But certain Western analyses, too, are susceptible to criticism and may occasionally show a special vulnerability in their concern over trauma, catharsis, social representationalism, and the fate of the Indonesian left. Not all Indonesians responded in the same way to the killings of 1965–66 and the subsequent change of regime. Seeing in *The Sun after September 1965* the bowed heads of the politically oppressed, one cannot look upon the emancipatory spirit that once inhabited the painting as its central and residing feature. Seen Pirous's way, the painting admits a subject for whom 1965 meant relief and liberation and makes intelligible the recent views put forward by a group of artists in the so-called “May Statement” of 1995.<sup>30</sup> Commemorating the May 1964 banning of the Cultural Manifesto by Sukarno, artists and writers gathered in Jakarta to express their grave concern over the political control of the arts and press by the Soeharto regime. I doubt Pirous has any wish to include himself publicly in this group, for his ambitions and civic-mindedness commonly keep him out of confrontations with the government. Yet in my experience, he is not without sympathy for those who draw on the ideological underpinnings of the New Order in order to talk back to or elude the authorities who would police the Indonesian art world.

In a recent essay, historian Nicholas Dirks (1990) argues that history has been tied up irrevocably with the life of the nation-state and notes, in particular, that the nation has played, and continues to play, an active role in producing, regulating, and defending official histories. Pirous's remarks are very

<sup>29</sup> Many recent works on the cultural dimensions of globalization (for example, Appadurai [1996], King [1991]) clearly point to global flows of cultural criticism as a significant contemporary phenomenon, yet they leave the topic relatively unexplored. Feminist scholars, such as Lata Mani (1989) and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994), have been most alert to problems of criticism and reception across national boundaries. See, too, the recent essay by Charles Briggs (1996), in which he explores the reception of criticism across and between communities.

<sup>30</sup> *Jakarta Post*, Saturday, May 13, 1995, p. 1.

telling in this regard, for he asserts—or did he concede—that Indonesian official history cannot be rewritten from within at this moment. The grip of that history is still firm. As both Robert Cribb (1990) and Adam Schwarz (1994) have remarked, the violent events of 1965 and 1966 have never become subject for a national soul-searching in New Order Indonesia, and are remembered far more often with pride or an indifferent shrug, than with guilt or anguish.

Some might argue that a cathartic exploration of the New Order's violent birth would permit artists, and perhaps the country, to come to terms with the bloodshed and traumatic memories of that time. There is no question that the pain and bitterness of millions have yet to be vented in open. But a vast number of Indonesians do not look upon the beginning of the Soeharto years in this way. For them—and here I include Pirous—the massacres of 1965 were the tragic consequence of communist-inspired chaos (see van Langenberg 1990). Indeed, it seems clear from his remarks that he does not see the mass violence of 1965 and 1966 as a trauma that has to be dealt with in any way in painterly work.<sup>31</sup> We perhaps expect too much of contemporary Indonesian art in wanting it to look back on 1965 in grief or in acknowledgment of deadly and widespread political crimes. In fact, a more revealing venture would be to examine recent paintings for signs of anxiety—not over the political violence of the past but over the possibility of its return.<sup>32</sup> After all, Soeharto's New Order is now confronting its own twilight. The country and the government itself are anxious about succession, knowing that modern Indonesia has never experienced a transfer of power that was not violent. I doubt, however, that an art that has been discouraged from acknowledging the political traumas of the past can get any purchase on their possible return. I see little prospect in finding a politically prescient or sharply critical art in the New Order. I see instead an art world that has been turned largely inward for over three decades and that remains unsure about what to expect when the Soeharto regime is replaced. When that time comes, it is possible that Indonesian artists may at last take an open and critical look back upon the repressiveness and originary violence of the New Order. And in doing so, perhaps some artists, feeling something like the relief, liberation, and hopeful anticipation that Pirous experienced in 1968, will seek out advantages in the emerging political system and its ascendant exhibitionary spaces. Opposition, opportunity, and betrayal will be reckoned in light of different political conditions, and a new Indonesian art will assert itself even as it remains subject to those writing its history and regulating its display.

<sup>31</sup> One could look for evidence of traumas that have spilled out—unannounced, unwanted, and unnoticed—into his paintings.

<sup>32</sup> Danilyn Rutherford (pers. corr.) has remarked that this anxiety may be a domesticated form of the traumas that emanated from the violence of 1965.

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