

Taste, taste of art, politics of art

The fields of cultural production occupy a dominated position in the field of power: that is a major fact ignored by ordinary theories of art and literature. Or, to retranslate this into a more common (but inadequate) language, I could say that artists and writers, and more generally intellectuals, are a dominated fraction of the dominant class. They are dominant, in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital and even, at least as far as certain of them are concerned, the possession of a volume of cultural capital great enough to exercise power over cultural capital; but writers and artists are dominated in their relations with those who hold political and economic power.

(Bourdieu, 1994: 144-145)

This article is more accurately described as ruminations which are not closely related to each other, but at least collectively tell a story about the struggle of a person or an organisation in advocating or establishing cultural capital on the strength of the economic capital he/she holds, or vice versa. Also, it talks about "taste" — something which makes us feel better or worse than other people — and also how an institution strives to establish its own taste in a broader application or acceptance.

I remember a large advertisement in Kompas newspaper in 2000, regarding an event called the Asia Pacific Nokia Arts Awards 2000. At that time, Nokia was, and certainly at present still is, in the midst of a tight competition with other hand phone brands. They compete with each other in matters

of sophisticated technology, physical appearance and functional operations. Nokia was striving to become the most popular hand phone brand name which would always be remembered, like Coca-cola, Marlboro, or Lucky Strike. Nokia was trying to broaden its image beyond its existence as a communication tool. In 2000, the theme of the Nokia Arts Awards was "Your Imagination Playground", which easily reminded the public of the Asia-Pacific Philip Morris Arts Awards which are held annually by Philip Morris, a multi-national company which produces the famous Marlboro cigarettes. In 1997, the American Library Association requested permission from Mattel, the makers of Barbie, for permission to use the pretty doll in their campaign to promote reading in America. With the slogan, "Reading is Always in Style", the campaign ran with large posters which featured a picture of Barbie in the middle. (Rogers, 1999:95)

The Nokia Arts Awards can be seen as an effort to achieve a certain social position. By organising an event like this, Nokia will not only be considered as a telecommunications product. It is also striving for a social position as an institution which has the authority or competence in judging the quality of art.

Cultural capital is a capital of knowledge and competency which is necessary to differentiate or evaluate whether an object is "art" or not. According to Bourdieu, several classes struggle with each other to increase the volume of the cultural capital that they own, and raise the value which is placed on certain capital forms. Bourdieu also assures that the relationship exists on both sides between the cultural capital and economic capital. He is certain that

people actively invest cultural capital to attain economic capital.

Nokia has a high economic capital. However, it has low cultural capital. By creating the Nokia Arts Awards, they desire to improve the position of their cultural capital. It is clear that Nokia wants to win the sympathy of a group which has high cultural capital, but low economic capital, in this case, artists.

The Nokia Arts Awards advertisement published in Kompas on October 29, 2000, announced the names of the winners who won the right to represent Indonesia on the Asia-Pacific level of competition: Deni Rahman, Tulus Rahadi, Wahyu Gunawan, Deskhairi, and Dadi Setiadi. They were all students at the Indonesian Institute for the Arts in Yogyakarta.

From the above explanation, it can be seen that Nokia continues to try to establish itself as a popular brand name. This can be seen not just in the success of the event Nokia has sponsored, but also in the success of its marketing strategies.

One exhibition organised by the Cemeti Art Foundation, and the most interesting one for me, was an exhibition entitled, *Awas! Recent Art from Indonesia*. This exhibition opened in Yogyakarta on October 11-15, 1999, and then travelled to galleries in several countries, including Australia, Japan, Germany and other European countries, and finally closing at Bentara Budaya in Jakarta in October 2002. There were 14 artists included in this exhibition: Agung Kurniawan, Apotik Komik, Bunga Jeruk, Heri Dono, Arahmaiani, Hanura Hosea, Popok Tri Wahyudi, Tisna Sanjaya, Samuel Indratma,

Krisna Murti, Nindityo Adipurnomo, S. Teddy D., Eddie Hara, and Agus Suwage.

It was not just the name of the exhibition that interested me, but rather one of the works by Apotik Komik, entitled "Under Estimate". This work intended to illustrate Apotik Komik's perspectives towards the phenomena occurring in the world of art and especially the relationships between artists, curators, collectors, and the community.

Apotik Komik's work, a collaboration between Ari Dyanto, Samuel Indratma, Popok Tri Wahyudi, exhibited a characteristic style: lively, bright colours, tumultuous and full of symbols, comical, and created with a cheerful, playful spirit. This work was made out of old photocopy machine ink containers which were split vertically and arranged to be standing straight. The split bodies were then drawn upon and "filled" with cardboard figures which were placed appearing to emerge out of the containers, or other objects and texts, both those self-composed and those taken randomly from advertisement or clippings.

In the second pile of containers, for instance, there was a picture of three men wearing black hats, black eyeglasses and black clothes, against a red background and holding a sheet of newsprint entitled, *Art News*. The man in the middle is saying, "Okay, guys! Here it is! The next works for the market!" But the man on the left says, "Wait! What's the issue, ideology or the message?" Then the man on the right responds, "Yeah, ... what about size, weight, space? Is it worth it?" Written across the strip along the top border is: "Curator line — do not cross".

On the fifth pile of containers, there is the message written: "History has begun ... when we all together hand in hand, side by side, realised that fate is in our hands and it's our right to work on building up our legacy ... little help from outside is OK as long as not from them who have the control over everything just because they had their own". Perhaps the reference to "those who are outside" in this sentence refers to the parties who have always been considered to hold roles in the world of art, such as the curators, collectors or art dealers. Beneath this statement, there is a figure wearing an orange hat and black clothes. Across his chest is the word "artist". He appears to be laughing, but is a bit uneasy because his hands are handcuffed. Beneath his hands there are the words written in large letters, "This could be a best seller."

The label "Young and Talented Artists" is written on the sixth pile of containers. In the front there is a young person riding an aeroplane which has the words written, "international routes". Perhaps this is an insinuation or expectation that every artist who is considered or considers him/herself to be young and talented will surely achieve the name and way to enter the international scene (which in this piece is symbolised with the words "international routes").

The most interesting illustration was on the seventh pile of containers. There was a small cardboard house, in front of it there was an open box which had a cross-section in it so that two photos could stand inside the house. It appeared that the two photos were taken at the same time, but from different angles. Appearing in the photos were

Mella Jaarsma, Damon Moon (both Mella Jaarsma and Damon Moon, along with Alexandra Kuss and M. Dwi Marianto were the curators for this exhibition), Samuel Indratma, Popok Tri Wahyudi, and Ari Dyanto. They were conversing together. The caption on the first photo is "invest a little", while the caption on the second is "get a lot". In front of the two photos is a separate caption, "a utopian community".

These creations of Apotik Komik are very interesting to contemplate, not because of their unique form, which is different from anything else, and their theme which actually is rather strange in the midst of a boom for artworks which undertake themes of violence, political issues, and other social-political issues — see, for instance, the works of Tisna Sanjaya ("Visit Indonesian Years"), Hanura Hosea ("Book Story"), or Krisna Murti ("President Brand Panty Liner") —, but more because, according to my own perceptions, the situation illustrated in this work is exactly what was happening in this exhibition.

When we discuss an exhibition, it is not enough just to discuss whose works are shown and what those works are like. An exhibition is, basically, a strategy to communicate the power of certain knowledge (Lidchi, 1997:185). Observing, collecting works or curating an exhibition are not natural activities that just happen. Further, we can ask: why were these works chosen and not others? Why were these 14 artists chosen and not others? Or we can ask: what is the objective of the curators in showing these works? What are the possible effects of exhibiting these works and these artists and not others? What are they trying to point out to the public?



Or from here we can know, who are the artists who are being promoted? What are the issues that are currently popular and attract public attention from abroad?

Basically, exhibitions never intend to “show something”, but rather to produce and construct a certain insight for people to contemplate. Exhibitions are never neutral, but are full of strength. For instance (in this exhibit), by showing that these art works represent the spirit of Indonesia at this time, these art works are the trend, these are “recent”! These are Indonesia’s newest works or art that represent Indonesia’s current condition.

This is more the case because it was Cemeti Art Foundation which organised the exhibition. Art researchers consider the Cemeti Art Foundation to have influence, not only through the contemporary art exhibitions it sponsors routinely, but because this institution is actively engaged in forming its own intellectuality through various discussion forums, workshops on writing about art, art documentation activities, and activities which promote research on art. Hence, Cemeti Art Foundation’s own position actually has much potential to promote its own taste of art as the dominant art vehicle. It is an agent of power. And, it is expected that everyone believes this because it is

Cemeti Art Foundation, a very influential organisation, that says it.

In one discussion at that time, one of the Apotik Komik personnel, Ari Dyanto, said that they were trying to tease the curators. But for me, they became in the end, the playthings of the curators as well. Their work actually implied an idea of anti-commodity, but when it was shown there, it became a commodity itself because the curators gave it another meaning by saying: “This is the newest work of art from Indonesia. It’s interesting, isn’t it?” And the curators actually became a part of the bigger game. It is a complicated game in the world of artists, curators, collectors and the public. A game which involves a tug-of-war and heavy stakes between desires, power, capital, and aesthetic values — those which draw blood and those which do not.

Nuraini Juliastuti is researcher of KUNCI Cultural Studies Centre, Yogyakarta

Bibliography:

1. Bourdieu, Pierre, *In Other Worlds, Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, 1994.
2. Lidchi, Henrietta, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.



Dr. Sumartono

On Creativity



One of the words most frequently used in discussions on visual arts in Indonesia, from the New Order period to today, is "creativity". In the centres of visual arts in Indonesia – Yogyakarta, Bandung and Jakarta – people never neglect to talk about creativity. Some artists consider themselves creative and accuse other artists of not being creative. And it is very easy for those who are accused of not being creative to find reasons for accusing their accusers of not being creative.

Many Indonesian artists want to be creative for as long as they live. In this context, creativity simply means creating different forms by tinkering or making new combinations. This tinkering goes on in a creative process which normally consists of five stages: formulating a problem, trying to solve the problem, reflecting, coming up with ideas and developing them.

Connoisseurs of creativity have in fact long purported that "creativity" itself is not enough; more important is "high creativity". "High creativity" is the ability to make innovations with a high social value. High creativity is real creativity. To have high creativity, I think an artist cannot restrict him-/herself in the visual art work he/she does, such as painting in just one style ad infinitum, and to demonstrate his/her creativity, simply tinkering with form so that the paintings all appear to be different in some way. This restricted kind of work can only constrain a painter, especially if the works he/she makes – always in the same style – are saleable. An artist like this may continue to be "creative", but it is difficult to have "high creativity".

One of the reasons for the crisis

in modern visual art in the West is the over tendency to develop "creativity" in the sense of creating different forms by tinkering or making new combinations. Get to know the styles of visual art works in books on modern visual art that are full of colour illustrations, then look at the most recent modern visual art works. What comments (if you are critical) do you have to make then? You are bound to say that the most recent modern visual art works are not in fact really new. All modern visual art works contain elements of other modern visual art works. The phenomenon of imitation is only too clear. If you like, you could call this an example of intertextuality. The "end" to the stories of many modern artists coincided with the crisis of modernism in visual arts – with some exceptions of course. Picasso (as one example), is not included among those artists who make it a hobby to simply tinker or combine forms. He experimented with all manner of techniques and media because he did not want to be constrained by the rigid boundaries of visual art. He was also always critical and did not want to be dictated too by anyone. For this reason, Picasso's story did not "end". He is still relevant for discussions today, because throughout his life he never stopped developing high creativity. Most of the innovations he produced are in the form of works that have widespread social influences (have high social values).

To have high creativity, an Indonesian artist today must continuously and tirelessly seek, explore, and experiment with different media and techniques without being confined by the rigid boundaries of visual art, must have the courage to go against the flow, and must be critical.

He/she must also be intellectual. In other words, the artist must also contribute to theoretical knowledge.

By tirelessly searching, exploring and experimenting with different media and techniques without being confined by the rigid boundaries of visual art, an artist will come to realise that the rigid boundaries of visual art are in fact a construction of the modern way of thinking that likes to pigeonhole. This pigeonholing has fettered many artists. Picasso taught us that experimenting with all manner of all media and techniques is perfectly valid, and made him not just a "big" artist but a "very big" artist. The works he produced, of various types, number in the thousands. While many others are proud of their "thirst for knowledge", Picasso is acclaimed by many for his insatiable curiosity. It would be quite easy to name several well-known artists in Yogyakarta and Bandung who also dislike pigeonholing and who delight in searching, exploring and experimenting tirelessly with different media and techniques, and in doing so contribute to theoretical knowledge, but I have deliberately left their names out of this article.

Taking Picasso as my example, I truly learnt lessons from his determined zest for searching, exploring and experimenting. I don't want to set him up as an ideal role model, although he is still relevant as a model today, Picasso alone is no longer enough. When Picasso was at his peak, the phenomenon of "aesthetics of everyday life" implied that that everything and every object in everyday life could be aestheticised. The implication is that the boundaries of visual art are no longer clear-cut, although for

conservative artists who are unable to think critically, these boundaries are very clear-cut, virtually axiomatic.

The proliferation of alternative art works such as installations, happening art, performance art, collaborations, and others, is an indication that the boundaries of visual art are becoming increasingly blurred. These types of art emerged out of the modern visual art crisis in the West, which was marked by the pandemic repetition and imitation of forms in visual art works. This proliferation of these types of art was not just a matter of time, because art or visual art has never been clearly defined.

The Indonesian artists who want to have “high creativity” must also have the nerves to go against the flow. Just imagine – when most artists are competing to produce works to satisfy market demands, you have to produce works to satisfy your own creativity. If a collector should then buy your work, it is not because it goes with the flow of the market. It is tragic to see that certain artists have changed their styles to satisfy market demands. Going against the flow is hard because what is at stake is the economy of the artist. In life circumstances, an artist will feel the economic pressure, especially if he/she has a family to feed. But in the history of man, there has never been an artist who died because he/she went against the flow.

Indonesian artists who have “high creativity” must also be consistently critical; critical in the sense of prioritising rationality/argumentation and morality. This is no easy matter either, because the implication is that an artist, as well as being critical of others, must also be critical of him/

herself. No one is one hundred percent consistent in their life (as the process of aging precludes total consistency in people's lives). If an artist is consistently critical, the expectation is that he/she should be continually changing. “Change” is the key word in all processes of development.

Dr. Sumartono is an art historian, lecturer at Indonesian Art Institute Yogyakarta, Tarumanegara University Jakarta, Trisakti University Jakarta and Postgraduate Studies in Gajah Mada University Yogyakarta.



WANTED: Indonesian Art Critic(ism)

186

Saut Situmorang

The most important issue currently dominating contemporary Indonesian art discourse — literature, theatre, film, and visual arts — is not the problem of an absence of any new masterpieces, as it is generally bemoaned, but rather, the crisis of art critic(ism)s. This crisis of art critic(ism)s would be easier to see if we placed Indonesian art “critic(ism)s” in the perspective of international art. In the context of the international art discourse, one issue that has received major attention for about the last ten years is the *canonisation* of art works. In the world of literature, for instance, writers of novels written in English who originate from the Third World, whether Asia, Africa or Central America/Caribbean, have questioned literary politics which select certain novelists to be included in the literary canon while allowing others to drown in obscurity. Authors of English-language novels from former British territories, like Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, are not listed by name or novel in the lists of writers who should be studied in their own countries. These lists are filled with only the names of British writers! Imagine what the fate of Third World writers is in the British school curriculum! This kind of colonialism of the literary canon can be found generally in countries that were former British territories and finally were opposed in what is currently referred to as Post-Colonial Studies. Prior to this, the Feminist movement questioned the politics of literary patriarchy in Western cultures, which unfairly and unreasonably ignored many women writers in the literary canon. What can be underlined from these cases of Feminism and Post-Colonial Studies is

that literary (and other art forms) critic(ism)s have a major role in deconstructing the reality of their art canon to effect a positive change in their cultural art discourse.

In the context of Indonesian art, of course, we still remember the bitter experience of how Indonesian modern art “masterpieces” were included in an exhibition organised by a Museum of Ethnography touring the United States only in the beginning of the 1990s. We can certainly interpret the orientalism practised by American art institutions in various ways, however, what is usually missed in the complaints is the *impotence* of Indonesia’s own art “critics” to speak about Indonesian art abroad. Is it not the professional responsibility of those who are considered and consider themselves to be Indonesian art “critics” to expound upon the *uniqueness* of Indonesian art so that Indonesian art works are exhibited in the appropriate places, i.e., modern/contemporary art galleries, not just in an oxymoronic exhibition in a museum of ethnography.

In our own country, recently an art scandal has been exposed with the accusation that Indonesians art “critics” are involved as middlemen between artists and collectors in the process of setting prices of art works. This accusation, which is not an empty one, is actually a reiterated admonition concerning what is currently inflecting our modern art discourse, i.e., the crisis of art critic(ism)s. For instance, if we read the Sunday editions of Indonesian newspapers, that is the edition that usually features a column about art, we find how few reviews of art *events* are written by our art “critics”. Usually, we find only news reports that are a kind of

pseudo-review, and most of these are written by art reporters of the respective newspapers. It appears that our art “critics” are more interested in writing freelance articles as “newspaper essays” and if they do write a *review*, it usually concerns certain exhibitions/art events whose contexts, if they are not “local canon” are “foreign-made” (i.e., European or American). Besides the unsatisfactory contribution of their thoughts, they have not produced a single book that contains a critical discussion on a particular issue or about a particular artist. Generally, Indonesian art critics — literary, theatre, film, and visual arts — are only “newspaper essayists” and have not yet contributed anything useful to our discourse of modern/contemporary art.

Fetishism of the market, which is currently trendy among Indonesian art “critics”, who are considered to be “most famous and have the broadest knowledge of visual arts”, is not the only cause of the crisis in criticism in our art world. There is another factor, which is of a more anti-intellectual nature now polluting the “critical” thinking, which is expected from those who claim to be “critics” or “art observers” in Indonesia.

At the end of the year 2000 I was involved in an art performance entitled “*Jalan/Street*”, by multi-talented artist Made Winata, in the “art colony” of Ubud, Bali. This performance art, which adopted the chaos of Indonesian traffic as its topic of discussion, created a non-art scandal before, during and after the performance took place. Beginning with a protest by a group of furious men who claimed to be “representing the local community”, that is Lodtunduh, where the



performance took place, over the "absence" of permission to close the public road which was used as the setting for the performance (the permission was actually granted to the performance art committee both by the owner of the public road, i.e., the Republic of Indonesia via the local police department, as well as by the responsible community authority), the scandal finally reached its climax when it was accused of "insulting the Hindu-Balinese religion". The element in the performance art that referred to Balinese traditions, such as the ceremony performed after a traffic accident occurred, was the primary reason used by the angry group of men in the accusation that the performance insulted the Hindu-Balinese religion.

In an incident like this, what is the "function" of those who claim to be "art observers"? Is it adding to the confusion of the problem, or attempting to provide a "light" which could bridge the interpretive chasm that separates avant-garde artists from their own community? In the context of the Balinese art world, I witnessed with deep concern the failure of the "art observers" in executing their professional duties as "art observers".

Also, if we examine it more closely, does the scandal of "Demolishing Hegemony" (*Mendobrak Hegemoni*) held at the Indonesian College of Arts (*Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, STSI*) in Denpasar, Bali, on 23-24 February 2001, which culminated in only a vulgar delirium reflecting the frustrations of a group of Indonesian art students, and not in an analytical "criticism" of what was intended by using the term "hegemony", represent proof of the absence of a tradition of art

critic(ism)s in Indonesia?

We certainly still remember how Clement Greenberg succeeded single-handedly in overthrowing the established prestige of Cubism in New York in the 1940s and replaced it with a local art movement which had not been considered anything previously because of its local origins (not made-in-Paris as Cubism was), i.e., Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps we can compare the contribution of ideas in introducing and defending Abstract Expressionism by Clement Greenberg, especially through critical essays, with that which was accomplished by critics HB Jassin and Chairil Anwar in our modern literature. The originality of thought as represented by these two art critics is generally absent in our art world and it is this fact which represents the prime reason why I charge that there is no tradition of art critic(ism)s in the Indonesian art world.

The absence of a tradition of art critic(ism) in Indonesia, as it is generally known in the Western art world, apparently has not ended life in the art world. New art works continue to be produced and a new phenomenon has begun to appear and spread in our art community, that is, the increasing popularity of the existence of what are called "alternative art spaces". (This phenomenon of "alternative art spaces", for me, can be viewed as a parallel with the trend found in the literary world, i.e., magazine and alternative publications, or what are known as "indie music" and "indie films" in the film and music worlds.) There are many reasons that can be offered for the profusion of these alternative art spaces, from the absence of a representative tradition of art critic(ism)s, as

I mentioned above, to the great need for a space for socialisation of works without the associated trouble of considering the costs of providing a conventional gallery or the complicated bureaucratic procedures of a conventional gallery exhibition.

Alternative art spaces are alternatives to art criticism in Indonesia. It is indeed ironic, but alternative art spaces are apparently far more relevant in the process of introducing Indonesian art to the public while representing a place where the development of contemporary Indonesian art can be enjoyed more dynamically. The absence of a tradition of our art critic(ism)s — this matter can also be taken as proof of the failure of the art education system at institutes and academies which are more oriented towards "producing" artists than art thinkers/critics — and (the need for) serious art magazines/journals which have intellectual weight (none of which are present at the moment) to make the positions of these alternative art spaces no longer just places to "exhibit" works, but also places where currently trendy ideas, concepts and "-isms" can be exchanged in our contemporary art discourse. An exhibition which is attended by senior, as well as junior artists, for instance, what's more one that is organised with strict curatorial standards, will be an excellent opportunity in studying art history. An exhibition such as this will be a concrete indication of the dynamic achievement of our artists in the midst of a quiet life of art that does not have a representative tradition of art critic(ism)s.

Although alternative art spaces can be considered as alternatives to art



criticism in Indonesia, our contemporary art discourse still needs a representative art critic figure, such as has become an intellectual tradition in Western cultures. Alternative art spaces cannot be too burdened with functions other than their institutional ones. The function of art criticism that is presently fulfilled by alternative art spaces through their exhibitions, which indeed tend to have an international and contemporary context, has recently reached a point of being unproductive. We can witness how contemporary Indonesians artists have attained much freedom in interpreting for themselves what is meant by "contemporary art", so that the works they offer us have the impression of casualness, not being conceptually solid, and very easy to produce (unreflective works). We have clearly seen the climax of this negative aspect of the freedoms of contemporary Indonesian artists in two major art events held recently in two cities considered to be Indonesia's art "centres", the *CP Open Biennale 2003* in Jakarta and the *Biennale Yogyakarta VIII 2003* in Yogyakarta. The general tendency that can be witnessed in the two biennale events, which were international and local, respectively, is how busy Indonesian artists are in attempting to become "contemporary", while forgetting to present an issue in their works. The formalism they consider "contemporary", ironically, actually has exposed the true reality of their own creative processes, i.e., a creative process without a concept, just using the artistic idioms which have been used in the West, European and American art worlds, which are currently already regarded as behind-the-times, but then are flavoured with local touches so that they

would be considered contextual. If only they realised how *Documenta II* in Kassel, Germany in 2002, became an important international art event and caused a commotion not because of the contemporary formalism, but precisely because it presented a contemporary issue which should be the artistic ideology of artists of the Third World: postcoloniality as identity.

Saut Situmorang, poet and independent editor.
He lives in Jogjakarta.