

Masahiro Ushiroshoji

A journey to Indonesia twenty-five years ago



I thought I was reborn.
The early afternoon thunderstorms, the rich fragrance of tropical flowers and fruits, the soul-soothing sound of *gamelan*, the dream-like dance, the voice of vendors from afar, the noises of crowded streets, dazzling sunshine, and above all, the paintings of Indonesia. Everything was a new experience. I watched, I listened, and I sensed the energies. It was as if I had been born again.

It was in December of 1978. I had just graduated from the university and joined the preparatory team for the opening of the newly founded Fukuoka Art Museum. I was 24 years old, and I strongly believed that certain values were eternal and shared universally. I was also incredibly ignorant.

Back then, Agus Djaya, Sudjojono, Affandi and Hendra Gunawan were still alive and well. At the presence of those glorious pioneers who opened up new vistas for the history of modern Indonesian art, I was hopelessly ignorant. I knew almost nothing about the modern art history of either Indonesia or the rest of Asia. In a way, the past 25 years of my life as a curator have been a way to redeem myself from the sin of ignorance.

In the dusky, muggy exhibition rooms of the Museum of Fine Arts and Ceramics located in the old district of Fatahillah in Jakarta, I encountered modern Indonesian paintings for the first time. For someone like me who was trained to regard Euro-American art history as the "right track", the only way to see Indonesian paintings then was from the viewpoint of Euro-American art. I recognised the paintings by identifying the western influences they were under: Impressionism,

Van Gogh, or Picasso, etc. I was probably attracted by the paintings I saw, but I could not admit it. Filtered through Euro-American perspectives, I could not quite see either the struggling history or the original aesthetic sense of the Indonesian modern paintings that were right there in front of me.

Artists affiliated with the Faculty of Fine Art and Design of the Bandung Institute of Technology, such as Mochtar Apin, Gregorius Sidharta and others, took us to artists' studios and arranged meetings with artists for us. Gradually, my eyes were opened up to issues of Indonesian modern art, its own unique expression, and the problems the artists were facing.

Fifteen years later, the Fukuoka Municipal Government approved my proposal for an exhibition tracing the history of the development of modern art in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. I also received a grant from the Japan Foundation to do research in Southeast Asia. Mochtar Apin had passed away. This time not only Gregorius Sidharta and Setiawan Sabana helped me again, but Jim Supangkat and many other friends also joined to assist me with the research. I treasured the friendships that had been cultivated for fifteen years. It took four more years for the exhibition, the Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia, to materialise. Sudjojono, Affandi, Agus Djaya, and Hendra Gunawan had all passed away by then. It was to my deepest regret that good old Mochtar Apin could not live to see the exhibition.

My sense of values was shattered the first time I tried spicy food in Indonesia. I was shocked to see that what was way too spicy for me was much loved by others. There was no

absolute, universal standard even for the basic sense of taste, not to mention the more complicated cultural traits, like aesthetic sense. While trying to get used to the burning taste of the local delicacies, it dawned on me that I had mistaken my own sense of values for universal truths. The spiciness of the food then seemed to be a punishment for my own stupidity.

It was at this time that I learned to turn away from the Euro-American views and tried to understand the values nurtured by the respective countries and cultures. My first journey to Indonesia in that December of 1978 turned out, literally, to be the starting point of my career as a curator. I was then indeed reborn then.

Probably everyone is born twice. The first time is incidental; the second time is destiny.

Masahiro Ushiroshoji is the former Chief Curator of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and professor at the University of Kyushu. He is currently living in Fukuoka, Japan.

Translated by Jessica T. Lyu-Hada

139

Masahiro Ushiroshoji

Kris Budiman



If the *Indies* are no longer beautiful

Viewing the scenery from atop the hill
As far as the eye can see
Rivers are meandering
Green rice-fields extending afar
Like a velvet carpet by the horizon
Mountains standing high
Under cloud parasols
Oh, what a beautiful sight

Overture: Dissemination of Meanings/ Significance

It is not very hard to describe the characteristics of the *Mooi Indië* ("Beautiful Indies") painting style. The lyrics of the children's song quoted above are successful, even as a stereotype, in describing almost perfectly many people's image of a tropical paradise, the beautiful country of Indonesia. Well, Beautiful Indies is basically a product of imagination about the nature (and people) of Indonesia that are serene, quiet and peaceful. Beautiful Indies is superlative scenery: extremely beautiful, all-pleasing, peaceful, quiet, tranquil Ironically, S. Soedjojono, the number-one antagonist of Beautiful Indies, was capable of characterising it aptly and briefly: "The mountain, coconut tree, and rice-field become the trinity for the painter". It is even said that the phrase is Soedjojono's coinage.¹ The exponent painters of this romantic Beautiful Indies include Abdullah Suriosubroto, Mas Pirngadi and Wakidi, in addition to European painters who lived in Indonesia, who were fond of recording "East Indian" panoramas, Java's in particular, in the idyllic atmosphere on their canvases.

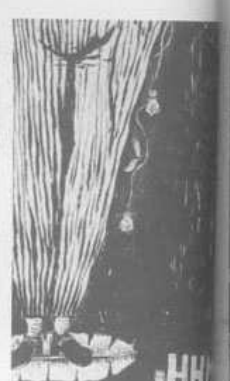
Perhaps it is not wrong to say that Beautiful Indies is the only painting school in Indonesia that has surpassed the time dimension: existing

in the past (the end of the 19th century, then at the peak of its popularity in the 1930s), the present, and – hopefully – the future. That is why it is not surprising when Onghokham concludes that Beautiful Indies is a heritage of the colonialist-orientalist discourse.² Actually we can further add: Beautiful Indies is also effective in overcoming differences between age groups and generations (my late father collected these works and his grandchild who is still in primary school also draws expansive rice-fields, coconut trees, with two mountains standing side by side in the background). However, a more interesting matter is that as a specific taste, Beautiful Indies has effectively surpassed sociological barriers. It has united spaces so remote by social distance, from Sokaraja, Banyumas to the presidential palace, from makeshift food-stalls frequented by boarding students in Condongatur, Sleman through homes of the rich in Menteng neighbourhood, Jakarta. In short, Beautiful Indies has succeeded in crossing class and perhaps even ideological boundaries: from Soekarno with his *Marhaen* proletariat through to the New Order with their Miniature Beautiful Indonesia Park. In addition, typologically speaking, Beautiful Indies is not only featured on painters' canvases, but can also be found in various other genres, such as television commercials promoting instant noodles or clove cigarettes, and even school textbooks and children's poems and songs.

Unfortunately, Beautiful Indies painters often have to swallow severe criticism. A canonic textbook on Indonesian art by Kusnadi,³ for instance, mentions at least three weak

points of the style, i.e., the absence of idealism, the apolitical nature, and the limited technical mastery. These deficiencies, relative to the works of preceding Indonesian artists, Raden Saleh's in particular, lead to thematic poverty in their paintings that merely offer beautiful landscapes – the themes of fauna and portraits as painted by Raden Saleh disappear – and they are even "formulaic, done in predictable ways with little originality and imagination," Garrett Kam writes⁴. In this regard, what has actually happened is the reproduction of a single meaning of the term Beautiful Indies in the Indonesian art critique discourse. Critics' appraisals – ranging from those of Soedjojono through Jim Supangkat's and Mikke Susanto's – have created a single identity, along with the frozen, impoverished interpretation of it. That is why Beautiful Indies that is all pretty, serene and peaceful, is nothing more than fiction constructed in the discourse of Indonesian art critique.

From the viewpoint of thematic variation, indeed there seems to be some narrowing, but this would not necessarily have been the case should theme be taken to signify primarily the semantic dimension or the structure of meanings. Seen this way, Beautiful Indies is not, in Roland Barthes' terminology, a *readerly* (lisable) text, but *writerly* (scriptable) one instead.⁵ It implies that as a text Beautiful Indies is not a single text that allows "easy" reading because in the reading process the conversion from signs to meanings takes place in a stable, clear, straightforward, and smooth way. Re-read from the semiotic viewpoint, Beautiful Indies may possibly transform into plural texts with disseminated



146
Kris Budiman

meanings. Therefore, so it seems, Beautiful Indies works call for a re-examination that adopts alternate reading/ interpreting procedures.

Re-reading Beautiful Indies

In the reading of any text, at least five main codes operate, into which all units of reading (*lexias*) can be grouped.⁶ Each of the *lexias* can fit into one of these main codes. They cover both the *syntagmatic* and the semantic aspects, concerning the ways parts of the text in question correlate with each other while associating with the world outside the text. First, the hermeneutic code (HER) is units that in various ways function to articulate and solve a problem or events/ occurrences that formulate the problem, or, otherwise, postpone the solution and even present a sort of puzzle and merely offers hints towards a solution. Second, the code of *semes* (SEM) or connotation is a code that utilises hints, clues, or "glimpses of meaning" presented by certain signs. Third, the symbolic code (SYM) that is the "grouping" or configuration code easily identifiable due to its regular recurrence in various ways and by textual means. Fourth, the *proairetic* code (ACT) that is the "action" code that implies the logic of human behaviour, i.e. that actions produce effects in a sequence. Fifth, the cultural code or the referential code (REF) that takes the form of a sort of a collective, anonymous and authoritative voice, which represents the "commonly accepted" knowledge or wisdom.

A semiotic approach to the three works by Abdullah Suriosubroto, applying the close reading procedures on the textual parts called *lexias* with all their codes, is expected to provide

adequate space for better appreciation of the plurality and dissemination of the meanings of Beautiful Indies text.

(1) *mountain* * This *lexia* does not function merely as the background for the other elements of the painting (Page 144, 145); rather, it functions as a sign that symbolises not only a geographical location, but a psychological position as well. On one hand, the presence of a mountain imbues a cool and calm ambience; on the other hand, it is symbolises masculine qualities of strength and solidity (in contrast to *the sea!*) and even, potential calamities, mishaps, threats of destruction (SEM. Catastrophe). Moreover, a mountain is a significant element in the Javanese cosmological system or their sacred symbolic universe. In this context, a mountain refers to something full of mysteries (let me remind you of the television series, *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, The Mystery of Mt Merapi), haunted and frightening: a realm of all kinds of ethereal, invisible beings and spirits. "*The scene of wilderness in the mountains is always taken as the realm of spirits.*" James Siegel infers when facing a Beautiful Indies painting in a living room in a city in Java⁷ (REF. Javanese Cosmology).

(2) *trees and woods* * Like the mountain, these *lexias* are polysemic. The presence of rich and leafy trees usually implies coolness and shelter. With all their greenness, they represent the fertile soil they grow upon and the prosperity, the wealth of a country (Page 144, 145). However, the darkness that is also present induces impressions of apparitions and

mysteriousness. As Siegel observes, the dark, dense trees, together with the mountain in the background, are suggestive of the existence of something behind them, an unseen and frightening realm ("the hidden areas of fearfulness").⁸ Those dark fields between the tree trunks and branches are *serem* (lit. terrifying), as the Javanese will say (SEM. Terrifying). This situation may then lead to a question (or, better, an anxiety) concerning what is behind the dark density. A fear that something may suddenly emerge from behind the darkness of the woods, the gigantic trees with their overhanging roots. (Page 144). Worries about some danger lurking behind the bush, mist covered trees (HER. Question). From the structural viewpoint, the *lexias* also offers a contrary relationship, an antithesis, namely one between *light* and *darkness* that is homologous to *front/rear, security/terror, and peacefulness/horror* (SYM. Antithesis: A/B).

(3) *rice fields and farmers* * By convention, the extensive green rice fields that look like a velvet carpet and the yellowing rice (Page 144, 145) represent the symbols of prosperity. However, there is one thing that remains unquestioned: who is the owner of those fields. Who owns the rice fields? The farmers? (HER. Question). Those farmers are indeed seen doing something there (Page 144), or, perhaps, they are harvesting the rice (ACT. Farming). Yet, the point is that they are working in the middle of a rice field that may not necessarily be their own. The rural scene as a heavenly, secure and peaceful site, as children's songs often

"There is a big country, a country that respects ordinary people and ordinary work"

Sanento Yuliman 1968

I never had the chance to meet Sanento Yuliman in the flesh, and always have difficulty imagining what this art critic looked like. When he died in 1992, I was enjoying having graduated from high school and was preparing to register myself in the Visual Arts Faculty at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). When I was a student, no one ever mentioned his name, talked about him. I am sure of that – it is not because I've forgotten or didn't listen closely. I realise more and more that the academic tradition in Visual Arts at ITB is one in which the people all too often revere their own ignorance and live off the great myth of this intellectual tradition. Don't imagine that there are people who truly preserve the legacy of ideas.

At some time in mid-1999, after I had been made a lecturer, I was reading a book in the library in the Visual Arts Faculty at ITB. There was a stack of damp, dusty books piled up in the cupboard. I found several books by Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and lots of others in French and English. The stamp on the flyleaves of these books read: "From the Collection of Sanento Yuliman". Some of them were from the 1970s. I was amazed – it appeared this person had read the works of thinkers who have only just become the vogue among our visual art intellectuals and writers. This person was familiar with ideas that later became known as post-modern, at a time when the visual arts social and

cultural context was still wanting. At a time when Indonesian visual art was still in the primitive stages of "formalist" painting. At a time when painters were making a living off the boom. At a time when the world of Indonesian visual art critics was still in the Dark Ages. This person, Sanento Yuliman, sat down to study Marcuse's *Revolt and Revolution*, when the student movement was mute, or doing sports. Since that time, I learnt to respect Sanento, an art writer who had such passionate romanticism.

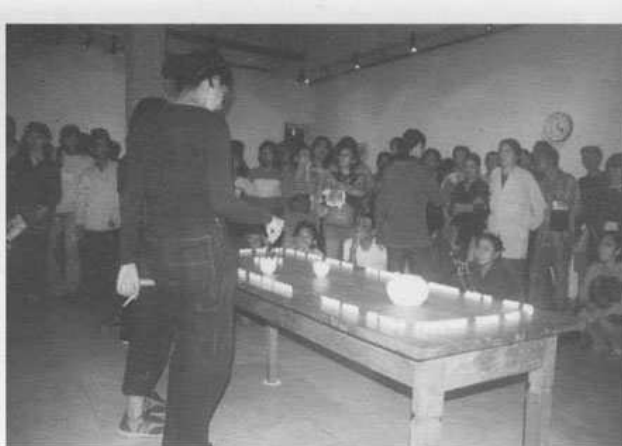
Sanento Yuliman became even more of an axiom among modern Indonesian visual art critics when a collection of his works was compiled in a book entitled, *Dua Seni Rupa: Sepilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman (Two Visual Arts: A Selection of Writings by Sanento Yuliman)*, a joint publication by Yayasan Kalam, Ford Foundation, and Majalah Mingguan Tempo. Launched in mid-2001, this book has challenged critics, the observers of our visual arts, to adopt pluralism in exploring the meanings, the institutional legitimacy, the epistemological position, the aesthetic research, the sociological map and their understanding of visual art activities. Once again, publication of this book is a proof of the ignorance of the institution I mentioned earlier; always too late. Slowly but surely, this challenge becomes a threat. Has there been any response from other critics to Sanento's writings? Has there been a corresponding dialectic process? If not, I can make the extreme assumption that: Sanento Yuliman implicitly proposed the dissolution of visual arts in Indonesia!

Like looking for a needle in a haystack, Sanento studied all possible

dimensions for the existence of Indonesian visual arts. It was not a needle that he found, but a kind of "signpost" as to *how* to find the needle. Sanento unearthed historical "facts", archives on epistemology, traditional institutions, the manifestation of artists, aesthetic trends and artistic products. But the latent irony is, visual arts in Indonesia did not (might not) exist; and the paradox is in the empirical evidence he himself discovered.

Sanento was no pessimist; in fact, he took a giant leap, leaving behind the collective confusion through his materialist writings. He does not position visual art as some kind of fanciful activity; in fact, he discusses the "stuff" of art, from brushes, paint, colour, canvas size, and displays in galleries, to the social talk of artists. Sanento removed art from the realms of the idealistic to discussion of objective facts that people could feel, touch, and smell.

The collection of essays in *Dua Seni Rupa* is an attempt to present a social modality of visual arts, because it tries to be as objective as possible. Sanento must have been patient and negotiated with himself in his reading, patient in the sense of not rushing to assume the values emerging from the development of visual arts that was happening in the West. After all, it is highly unlikely that Sanento Yuliman was not familiar with the names of Western artists, art practices and discourse. Having the "patience" not to automatically draw comparisons with art practices in the West substantiates just how much Sanento stretched his imagination to make comparable suppositions about Indonesian visual art practices in the course of world



changes. It is this patience, moreover, which indicates that Sanento was searching for the "true identity" of Indonesian visual art. If you read all the essays in this book, you will find that Sanento isolates the world of Indonesian visual art from the "threat" of external change.

Many of Sanento's writings are set as a trap. Many artists think that they have been interpreted with beauty, lucidity, clarity and simplicity by Sanento. Many also think that this model of criticism is fit and proper, without realising that there is a sharply critical dimension to all Sanento's essays. Sanento's model of criticism has, ultimately, become de rigueur for other art writers. Sensitivity to Sanento's way of thinking has slowly turned into an addiction as a model of writing, because it benefits both parties. Artists like to be embellished in "flowery" sentences, the criticism safely hiding their ignorance. Even though what Sanento did was to criticise the lack of awareness of artists, gallery owners, art collectors, higher education institutes of art in Indonesia. For Sanento, this Feldman-style criticism signified that art works made by artists are not deserving of other models of criticism. Sanento presents this Feldman-style criticism to signify that for works like that, Feldman suffices. Why bother quoting Baudrillard or Marcuse when Sanento doubted the level of understanding of artists and the art community. Here, Sanento realises the difficulty he had finding a decent sparring partner. Empirical facts provide sufficient evidence that the need for criticism is contingent on the level of understanding of actors in visual arts.

Sanento understood about not

wanting to be the one and only intellectual. He understood that in many aspects, the solution was simple. But I am certain that Sanento also understood that, in the end, ignorance cannot be protected forever. He waited and waited, with quiet patience, in frozen suspension. On the other hand, commercialism of art works can turn artists into arrogant, conceited, self-centred people, who feel they provide a service to the community. The boom in painting art heralded extravagance of another kind – the extravagance of exhibition openings, artists' lifestyles. Yet, Sanento tried to believe these facts were a dynamic of change in the art infrastructure that must be promoted collectively.

Sanento believed that paintings, more so than other art practices, are essential to introduce visual arts to the public. But he suspected that the precedence of painting would become a canon, that it would become the one and only art practice that was prized, distinguished.

His prediction came true, and holds even today. Painting is the art practice that has the closest relationship with industrial growth, in which society demands interior decoration for luxury houses, for hotels and offices. This situation is not balanced, as other art practices have in fact suffered quite the opposite fate.

What was Sanento Yuliman's goal? I mentioned earlier, that while eagerly searching for the originality in Indonesian visual arts, it seems that Sanento found a labyrinth that he knew could turn around established conceptions or views of art. But Sanento was too stubborn to find "another path" for the existence of visual art in

Indonesia. And the price he had to pay for this belief was high. Sanento died a torn and tired visual art thinker, while quietly placing a motion of no confidence in change in Indonesian visual arts. That is, healthy growth in the social art scene.

Am I dramatising the departure of this art critic who died that May 1992? Perhaps. And I eagerly await the publication of his thesis: *Berapa Masalah Kritik Seni Lukis Indonesia* (1968).

Aminudin TH. Siregar, lecturer in visual arts, Bandung Institute of Technology.

Asikin Hasan

A few notes on new media

The term "new" in art is actually not something new. It is often used to highlight differences vis a vis "old" works of previous times. In the first half of the 1970s, for instance, there was the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (lit., New Art Movement). In its exhibition, this movement even played with the term, *baru* (new) by parodying a popular advertisement song which promoted a drink: "*ini seni rupa baru, ini baru seni rupa*" (meaning, more or less, "this is new art, only *this* is art"). Currently, we use the term "new media" to highlight the presence of works such as installations, performances, photography, video art, web art, digital art, and so on. In an indirect way, the term "new media" helps to clarify works we now know as contemporary art. In its evolution, however, the term "new" has often incurred misunderstandings, just as in the case of *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* in the past and, currently, in the phrase, "new media".

The term "new media" cannot escape the association with influences of new technologies, including the digital camera, video recorders, internet, and other equipment related to information technology. Sometimes there is even the impression that the role of technology has become excessive in certain works. As a consequence, many people have come to identify "new media" as merely works that employ "new" and/or sophisticated equipment. This is despite the fact that new media works also include installations that do not necessarily involve sophisticated instruments. The same holds true for performance art in which "the body" is the main medium making it the most primitive amongst new media works in its representation of reality. It is here

that we often find ambiguities with the application of the term "new media". The tug of war between withering ideological interests on one hand and the influences of current technology on the other causes the works to lose their passion.

In Indonesia, new media emerged only in the first half of the 1970s through the works of art students, in Bandung and Yogyakarta especially, and involved representational objects on one hand, but also the "actual object" on the other. Instead of representing a chair through imaging, for instance, they presented an actual chair in its concrete form for viewing. Objects were arranged in a configuration or each stood by itself as its own work. This inclination towards installations, concomitant with performance art and art happenings, marked the phenomenon of a dematerialisation of visual art.

At that time there was no term consistent enough to identify this phenomenon. Several labels circulated, including environmental art, process art, public art, experimental art, happening art, and others coined by the artists themselves. It was only recently that we were introduced to the terms "installation" and "performance art". It was Dirk Oegoede, a Dutch artist, who introduced the term "installation" in a workshop at the Bandung Institute of Technology with a number of art students from the Institute. The workshop offered a new alternative for works in which a number of objects were displayed and arranged within a space. One of the characteristic features of both installations and performances is that the narrative content sometimes plays a more significant role than the visual object(s). Some have remarked

that this is a form of external elements polluting art.

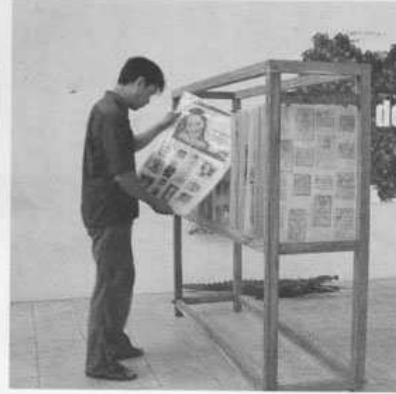
In 1993/1994, new media won a place in the Biennial IX: Jakarta Contemporary Art exhibition, presenting, among others works, installations and art performances by Semsar Siahaan, Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Mella Jaarsma, Agus Suwage, Tisna Sanjaya, and Krisna Murti. These were artists whose works had entered international contemporary art forums abroad.

At that time, video art – another form of new media that emerged in the early part of the 1990s – was not yet a major topic of discussion, although some artists had already showed traces of it in their works at the exhibition. Fiery debates erupted only around the installations, particularly Semsar Siahaan's highly provocative work entitled "*Penggalian Kembali*" ("Excavation"), set in ruins of the Taman Ismail Marzuki gallery structure in Jakarta.

Only later, in the 2000s, did video art begin to be celebrated in various cities, especially by the younger generation. Again, the easy accessibility of audio-visual recording equipment and the easy access to all parts of the world enabled by the internet facilitated the development and intermingling of those generations actively involved in this field. Some said that this development springs from the increasing dispersion of the current daily flood of visual culture via television, advertisements, and films.

The experiences of some of our artists in various international events of contemporary art featuring many video art works stimulated the growth of video art in Indonesia. Video works





from Germany, the Netherlands, France, Finland, the United States, Japan, and Australia invaded Indonesia. This, no doubt, was made easy by the portable video package sent to everywhere in the form of disks: the video compact disc (VCD) or digital compact disc (DVD). Never before in the entire history of Indonesian art had communication and adaptation evolved as swiftly as it did with the video art in this era.

Intensive workshops involving new media artists from other countries have taken place. These artists have formed an evolving network of video artists from around the world. Groups of new media art have been springing up, including Asbestos, Bandung Centre for New Media ArtS, Jejaring, and Ruang Rupa, among others.

There are also festivals, such as *baf-NAF (The Bandung Video, Film, and New Media Art Forum)*, scheduled biennially in Bandung. This Festival is open to video artists from various countries. Currently in co-operation with several institutions in Australia, Jejaring is presenting an exhibition entitled, *Transit*. A recent exhibition, in Townsville, which featured video art works by artists from various countries, moved to Darwin in September 2003. The initiative is interesting as it is growing from below, i.e., the results of artists interacting amongst themselves. Ruang Rupa held a similar festival this year in Jakarta, entitled *OK Video*. Like *baf-NAF*, *OK* was intended to be international. In the same year, Cemeti Art House and *Erasmushuis* Jakarta presented *GRID*, a new media exhibition that offered discourse on multiculturalism.

From these brief descriptions

we see differences in characters among generations of new media. The early generation that emerged in the 1970s presented mainly installations and performances, positioning their works as resistance to grand ideas.

This is not the case with the 2000-era generation. This generation of 2000, most of whom present works of video art, video performance, and installation video, apparently have left heroic resistance behind. We never hear, for instance, that they proclaim this manifesto or that manifesto as the older generation did. It is as if they are not fighting anyone and anything, but instead, are occupied with their own celebrations. We are even surprised by small things in their video works, as in scenes where they are hurting themselves or exploring various sensations and issues connected with the body.

These rapid developments call for loyal chroniclers lest we repeat the frequent misreading of "new media" evolving here in Indonesia.

Asikin Hasan is a curator at Lontar Gallery, Komunitas Utan Kayu. He lives and works in Jakarta.

Goenawan Mohamad

A urinal, A "name"

In this gallery, you will see a canvas with a signature, a name.... But there is a difference between a name and a "name". This essay explores this idea, at a moment in the history of Indonesian visual art when workshops are replacing galleries, when curators, collectors and the market have gained, and are developing, a greater role than in the past, and when criticism and debate barely reverberate in society. In other words, at a time when visual art works have become "names". This essay explores the idea of "name".

"Name" is an essential part of the "economy of recognition". When we want to make the process of identification and recognition more efficient, "Van Gogh" is used to identify all works by Vincent van Gogh, both his early and final works, both those with wild sweeping brushstrokes and those with delicate lines – from *The Potato Eaters* (completed in 1885) to *Wheatfield with Crows* (completed in 1890, three months before he committed suicide).

It seems that "name" appears to be used in the same way as trademarks: we remember "Bata" and "Armani". Like a trademark, a "name" signifies a transformation from something that is singular, incomparable, unique, and private, to something that can be exchanged – something that is related to social relations, particularly those formed by artists, curators, collectors, galleries and the market. It contains an element of the "commodity fetishism" described by Karl Marx. It even, it seems, also gives (and one can imagine, has) more power: the "name" has its own exchange value, which is called "price", a value that is associated with the passion or exertion of the artist

when he or she produces a work.

Mystification often does grow with the period of time between work and appreciation. An "Affandi" or a "Srihadi", in the end, has a value on a certain scale, which is not affected particularly by differences in quality and form. So Affandi's *Kaabah* (which for me is devoid of energy or inspiration) and his *Eiffel Tower* (which I feel is Affandi's strongest work), are in the same classification. In the economy of recognition, of even less importance is the obvious difference between works by Srihadi from the 1960s, which attempt to capture the vibrant light of the Acropolis under the Greek skies, and his works from the 1990s, which portray over and over again the suppleness of Balinese dancers.

"Name" can also be seen as a function of distance and exoticism. One of the myths about visual art – crafts in particular – and traditional societies is the myth of anonymity. I once visited a curator of a crafts museum in New Delhi, India, who questioned that assumption by asking: Anonymous to whom? This question shattered the myth. It makes us realise that for those living in the community where the craft was produced, the name of the artist – the *wayang* designer, the carver of shrine walls, and the *kris* maker – is not an unknown. We know that Ken Arok was acquainted with Empu Gandring. During the Mughal empire (from the 16th century to the 19th century in India), visual art works such as those found in the stories of Hamzah and Lamdahur, for example, give the name of the artist.

But, while "acquaintance" is one thing, "name" is quite another. In the beginning, perhaps "name" grew

from the discomfort with European humanism that we can see reflected in the work of Michelangelo. From this developed the idea of "genius" in Kant's aesthetics (and in a certain sense also Croce's). Some argue that his precepts are Romantic, so that "genius" – in much of avant-garde art – also means the "I", the "wild animal" from the "horde of the discarded". In other words, the "genius" is one and the same as the "rebel" who hits back at a "normal", "bourgeois" society. In all these trends, the artist, the designer, is the "I" that waves from within the work, from within the environment.

But the artist as "I" did not survive. After Marcel Duchamp, the question of "name" gave rise to a paradox: the "I" wanted to be destroyed, but at the same time, it became indestructible.

When, in 1917, Duchamp submitted the shocking *Fountain* to the committee of the grand exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists in New York, he shattered a number of preconceptions. The story of *Fountain* has become a legend in its own right in the history of visual art of the 20th century: Duchamp submitted an almost entire urinal of the mass-produced type and style for exhibition. On one side were the words, "R. Mutt, 1917". Although the slogan for this exhibition in New York was "no jury, no prizes", and more than 2,000 works were submitted and accepted for exhibition – most from unknown artists – "R. Mutt's *Fountain* was rejected. A press statement released by the board of directors of The Society of Independent Artists stated the reason for this: "Although *Fountain* may be a useful object in its place, this exhibition is not

that place; by our definition, it is not a work of art."

But that is just what Duchamp wanted to call into question: the definition of "work of art". The problem, of course, was not just with content of the definition itself, but who should decide that one definition is more valid than another. Here, I propose that Duchamp gave birth to a paradox that has shaped art discourse ever since.

Entering his urinal to a visual art exhibition, Duchamp indirectly showed that the baptism of something into the category of "visual art" was actually determined by political tastes and conventions: at the end of the day, the definition is the erratic result of competition, association and negotiation between the various powers in discourse. Duchamp presented a readymade, a urinal, as a rendezvous, that was what he proposed. In this way, he opened up an arena, because this readymade was a rendezvous that viewers came to and participated in shaping the moment, to participate in deciding whether it was an aesthetic moment or not.

This was a first performance, of course, and from here Duchamp opened the door – one might even say a Pandora's box – and a multitude of trends burst forth in a myriad of directions. The Dadaists were born, and in Hans Arp's mind, they – while abusing what is generally known as "art" – placed nature as a whole "above the hierarchy of art". About four decades after Duchamp, Harold Rosenberg said that to qualify as "modern art", a work need not be "modern", or even "art". For him, a 3,000-year old mask from the South Seas could be called "modern" and a piece of driftwood could be "art".

In the same way, "name" and

"I" were overthrown. Because who created this piece of driftwood?

Duchamp inscribed the words "R. Mutt" on a porcelain urinal. He did not sign it "Duchamp", the painter of the famed *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2*. The question was not just who was "R. Mutt", no one was sure whether this was actually a name. At the end of the day, this is not really relevant. The work of an artist should not come into being without feeling and taste (which is "a total anaesthesia"), and no "genius". Or we must provide another answer to the question of what is meant by "genius" in this respect. "Genius", said Duchamp is "the impossibility of creating", *"l'impossibilité du faire"*.

We may be easily dumbfounded by Duchamp's words. *"L'impossibilité du faire"* is pronounced the same as *"l'impossibilité du fer"* – "the impossibility of iron"¹

As I interpret it, what is implicit here is recognition of the impossibility of humans to "create" (*faire*), and also the impossibility of making objects and earth ("earth" being a metaphor for iron – *fer*) merely as objects, as things. We find this "impossibility" not only in the work of New York's Richard Stankiewicz and of the Swiss, Jean Tinguely – who adapt their creative styles to the scrap iron and other scrap metals they find, while at the same time placing this scrap iron and metal in a position that is no longer one of a material that has to be pulverised before it is made into something else. The same thing is implicit in the work of Cokot, from a Balinese village: he creates forms while following the lines of the piece of wood that is the medium (not "material") of his sculptures.

In fact it was from this *"l'impossibilité du faire"* that visual art began: art is a recognition, that things other than human – while they too feel to be a part of life – cannot be considered entirely in terms of a pragmatic scheme that prioritises use, or a concept that defines, or in a quantitative approach that calculates weight, area or volume. Before the orange boats at the shore's edge, facing the not-quite-blue waves, between the rare grasses and shells, a human – the artist – finds that "these unassuming objects (in fact) persistently tease one's thoughts".

These words are borrowed from Heidegger, almost two decades after Duchamp's *Fountain* turned into a visual art event in New York. Without making mention of the various events and tendencies in visual art in the early 20th century, but congruent with the disappointment in European humanism following the devastating First World War, a war that spread gloom about the competence of humankind, Heidegger proposed an origin of art that was far and away from that of the Kant tradition. For Heidegger, there was no connection between a work of art and the dictate of "genius". The opening paragraph of his research in 1935 reads, "The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist."²

In other words, the artist does not even determine his own "career". Heidegger's words on visual art – which in my opinion are very fitting to discussion of aesthetics after Duchamp – seem to be an integral part of the view towards the world that he called *Gelassenheit*. With *Gelassenheit*, there is no aggression, no provocation,

towards nature. What there is in fact is a recognition that “what is known is not exact, what is controlled is not certain”. It is indeed rather odd to link the chaos of Dadaism, or the games of irony and parody after Duchamp, with the “meditative” ideas put forward by Heidegger – which constitute a different approach, and an alternative analytical approach that describes and quantifies the earth and moves with and in the abstract. But in placing the subject as something that is soft and gentle, when placing the artist as the “I”, Duchamp and Heidegger were indeed in the same vein.

The humanism of Heidegger is humanism that sees man as *Dasein* who “tend what Is”; he is *der Hirt des Seins*. So, questioning what “is” is different from study and investigation. The question of what “is”, for Heidegger, is closer to the approach that places “I” on the soft, gentle, flexible and fragile side, the side that is accepting of the world and everything in it and shores it up. In other words, questioning what “is” is completely different from showering questions and groping for answers for the questioner, for the “I”. Reflecting, thinking, that is giving thanks, expressing one’s gratitude. *Das Denken dankt*.³

A work of art is a celebration of this “thanks”, and is certainly not the result of an investigation. When Matisse trembled before a flower pot, when Zaini was dumbfounded before boats in the sea, they were actually shoring up (*men-sumangga-kan*, from the word “*sangga*” or prop, which is related to “*menyangga*”, to shore up or prop up) the signs of what “Is” in order that their presence is whole. That is perhaps the moment that Heidegger

calls *Seinlassen*. In that moment, finding the truth does not mean prying it out and taking it apart, and creating, not just making. Creating also means protecting. “A work of art”, said Heidegger “lets the earth be an earth”.

This does not mean that the artist is completely passive. But his or her activity is a humble process. Because creating is like “drawing” water from a spring: *schöpfen* for Heidegger means “creating” and also “drawing” (as water from a well). In other words, the artist is not the subject that manages – in the sense of designing, forming and controlling – the object. The artist may even be less important than the work. He or she, in Heidegger’s words, “is almost like a path that destroys itself in the creative process so that the work appears.”

In this regard, Heidegger warns against the flawed interpretation of “modern subjectivism”, which sees creation as the “achievement of the genius of the subject who is in control of himself”. In other words, the “I” is overthrown, the “genius” is denied, and the subject slides away – a theme that has resounded in length and breadth since the beginning of the 20th century.

With or without Heidegger, “modern subjectivism” has been cast off vociferously in the various new art movements. We heard it in the 1920s in New York, when Francis Picabia said that a painting is only a “mixture of oil and pigment”. We heard it again when Hans Arp proposed that art was “anonymous and collective”. More than half a century later, in Dusseldorf, Joseph Beuys continued to insist right up to the time of his death in 1986, that “everyone is an artist”. At the end of the 1970s, in Jakarta, the “New Art

Movement” criticised the idea of “specialism” in visual art, rejecting avant-gardism, which was influenced by the Romantic conviction that credited the artist as a genius. And we recall the famous research of Sanento Yuliman that criticised the idea of a hierarchy in which “high art” held a higher position than common skills, tools and utensils.⁴

This, which is what a sociologist refers to as “democratisation of genius”, at various times rocked the old premises – but then the paradox raised by Duchamp emerged.

What has always been in question is: if the urinal with the inscription “R. Mutt, 1917” had not been entered by Duchamp – who had by that time become a “name” – and had not been a point of discussion since the publication of an article in the journal *The Blind Man* in 1917 right up to the publication of this article, what would have happened to that readymade? We know that it was lost, and then replaced by someone else with a readymade from the same factory, which can be seen at the Tate Modern, and so we know that it is of no importance who made and installed this urinal. But in any case, that this was Duchamp, the artist, who made this object that could be easily replaced, was an event without equal.

So, in fact, the subject did not die, and I think Heidegger was mistaken when he likened it to “a path that destroys itself in the creative process”. That is not all. The more the subject is said to be lost, the more important it becomes. The presentation of readymades, the use of *objet trouvé*, such as handlebars and saddles in the work of Stankiewicz or bolts and metal sheet in the work of Richard Deacon, who refers to himself as a “fabricator”,

or the willingness to accept machinery that can be mass produced as an art object, does not bring us entirely to the "post-erotic" art world of Walter Benjamin. Duchamp's hope that entering this vulgar and tasteless work, as if in "total anaesthesia", would promote the achievement of utopia, was, in the end, not fulfilled.

Not far from Duchamp in time, space and sentiment, was Man Ray. Yet, this artist did not produce, from his *objet trouvé*, something that was devoid of self-expression, something that revealed, in the words of Duchamp, "the beauty of indifference". Ray's work *Lee Miller Disappears* (a combination of a metronome and a photo of a woman), for example, is not an indifferent work; both record and project a feeling of tranquillity and melancholy.

Surrealism too, which sets aside the conscious "I" and recognises the sub-conscious, ultimately reveals the subject in whole: *Persistence of Memory* is acknowledged as being the work of Salvador Dali, the same Salvador Dali who painted *Crucifixion*. Although surrealist, Dali still gives great attention to detail and precision, René Magritte to design and flow – which is very different from the expression of the "sub-conscious" that appears in the "automatic" poetry of Andre Breton. In the works of Dali and Magritte, the sub-conscious, the dreamlike, is apparent in the product and interpretation, not in the artist himself.

So, although perhaps the subject no longer screams "I", or "I am the untamed animal", is it true to say that it is not there? Is the "genius" really dead? It seems not. At the end of the 1960s, "minimalist" artist, Donald

Judd, made four identical boxes from polished steel and amber-coloured Plexiglas. With this work, (which he entitled *Untitled*), he wished to state that the individuality of the artist is of absolutely no importance. More radical still were the ideas of the Fluxus Movement in wanting to deny not only the individuality of the artist, but also the division between artists and non-artists. One example of this form of expression is when the artist leaves a series or set of "instructions" that others, anyone, can follow. In this way, a work of art need no longer be called a work of art.

But, as De Duve said, if utopia is not defined it is doomed to fail⁵. Because mediation is always necessary: in the Fluxus project, the artist had to have a record to show that these "instructions" had been followed, so that they could be communicated to the art community – so that it be known that this "art that did not want to be called art" had been made or carried out. Ultimately, someone has to make the decision. In Judd's statement, "if a person says that a work is art, then it is art", implies that "someone" has to make it, do it.

Not far from this is the Conceptual Art of Joseph Kosuth – another voice emerging from the Pandora's Box opened by Duchamp. "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in terms of its basic characteristic) because the only art is the conceptual", Kosuth argued. For him, a work of art is "a tautology". This means, that it is a presentation of the artist's idea: if the artist says that what is presented is "art", then that is what it will be. In other words, "art" is "truly a priori".

I am, so art is – that is it, in

the end, art needs a subject that can give birth to art, or as God said "And it came into being!" The "I" re-emerges in an important role. Recent visual art history has demonstrated that the crisis of "subjective modernism" does not mean the bankruptcy of humanism.

Nevertheless, after Duchamp's urinal, it appears that there is inevitably an illusion in the integrity and independence of the "I". The definition of "art" in the statements of Judd and Kosuth, is, in any case, in the form of language, and the course in language is one that is inconsistent and cannot in itself define "I". As a result, "genius" does not exist in one form. It does not exist, on the one hand, in conversation. The author dies, as in the famous words of Roland Barthes, but in the sense that what dies is only "authority". The defining source and power no longer exists.

We are reminded of Duchamp: he mentioned the word *rendezvous*, which for me is a meeting of subjects, each vulnerable and flexible, a transient, spontaneous meeting. Here, the artist is only like, to use a poetic metaphor of Duchamp's, an "almond tree in bloom". Around the almond tree and its blooming flowers, a work of art "comes into being" – and, in a certain sense, also "blooms" – because it will continue to touch whoever sees it, like when Matisse looked at flowers: forming, caring for, shoring up, welcoming, "*sumangga*".

But, alas, in the history of visual art, moments like this do not happen everyday. When they do happen, they do not last for long. So, a *rendezvous* always grows into a system and order, because people always need these so the astounding can be felt again, the



poignant repeated, the beautiful affirmed. So, "the economy of recognition" comes into play. "Name" is born as a part of identity, and identity freezes in all sorts of ways we experience intensely the differences that inevitably appear in a work. Packaged in an identity, a work of art no longer exists in itself; it is lost in its "self-subsistence".

So, it shifts from a rendezvous to a social relationship that is shaped by curators, critics, galleries, and whoever is involved in "commodity fetishism". Thus, connoisseurs and critics are wrapped up in themselves. Art traders supply the market. Study of the history of art has turned these works into scientific objects. But, as Heidegger questioned, "amidst all this busyness, can we make contact with the work itself?"

Goenawan Mohamad is a writer and senior editor of *Tempo*. He lives and works in Jakarta.

(Footnotes)

¹Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, an October Book (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 166 and so on. This book, is, of course, more about Kant than the others, including Heidegger, who in my opinion, after Duchamp, was more important than Kant.

²Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 17. This quote from Heidegger on art is taken from this research from 1935.

³I got this great description (and borrowed it) from the introduction to the thoughts of Heidegger by George Steiner in *Heidegger* (Glasgow, Great Britain: Fontana/Collins, 1978), particularly pp. 126-130.

⁴I quote from Rizki A. Zaelani, "Yogyakarta Art of the 1990s: A Case Study in the Development of Indonesian Contemporary Art", in Jim Supangkat, et al., *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene* (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Foundation & Prince Claus Library, 2001), p. 114.

⁵Thierry De Duve, p. 298.