

# Indonesia breaks out onto int'l art scene

The first showing of Indonesia since 1954 at the world's most prestigious contemporary art show the Venice Biennale, almost had to be canceled because the Indonesian government did not pay the

rental fee on time. It was due to the strong initiative of the participating artists and the efforts of German gallery Ochs and Pruess that everything went ahead as planned. Artists Tisna Sanjaya,

Arahmaiani, Made Wianta and Dadang Kristanto are now representing Indonesia at the Biennale, which opened last month and will run until early November. The Berlin-based Asian fine arts gallery repre-

sents Indonesian artists Arahmaiani, Heri Dono and Eddie Harra. Specializing in East Asian art, Ochs and Pruess became involved in Indonesian art during an exhibition in 1999. Since then, it has curated several exhibitions featuring Indonesian artists in cooperation with Cemeti Art Foundation in Yogyakarta, and has also supported scholarships for Tisna Sanjaya and S. Teddy D. through the Forum Ludwig foundation in Aachen.

**Christina Schott**  
 Contributor  
 Berlin

Gallery owner and artistic manager Alexander Ochs shared his thoughts about Indonesia's showing at the Venice Biennale, Western arrogance and the position of Indonesian art in the global art scene.

**Question:** What is the significance of Indonesia's showing at the Venice Biennale?  
**Answer:** The new curator of the Biennale opened the event to the world. Now, everybody in the West "operating art system" observes very carefully what is going on. This is the first national presentation of

Indonesia at the Biennale in almost 50 years. A cancellation would have caused a very negative impact on the image of Indonesian art, similar to how China's image was damaged because of its cancellation. I think, in both countries, those politicians responsible are not yet really aware that modern art can also be an indicator of democracy. Political analysis, however, is not our business. We only want to support artists in expressing themselves. But the public cannot always tell who is representing which artist, especially if there are still showings of solo artists, as is the case with Heri Dono — the first Indonesian who presented his work at the Biennale independently of the national context.

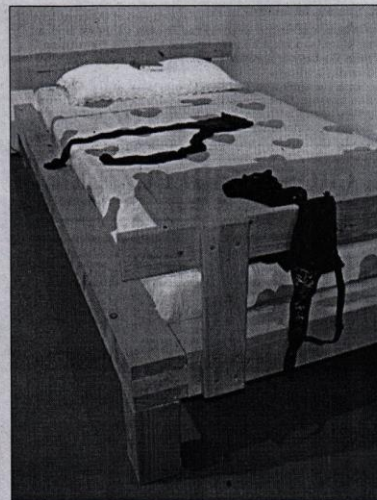
A national show needs a minimum of three artists to be at least a little representative. Obviously, this was understood in Indonesia at the last minute and the presentation could go on — hopefully, with the best possible result.

**What is the international perception of Indonesian art?**  
 The West is very arrogant in its perception, as the entire Western "operating art system" is very arrogant. But this year's Venice Biennale shows that this arrogance might gradually fade: More than 100 artists from Asia will present their work there, although it will still be dominated by East Asia. Indonesian art, contrary to Chinese contemporary art, has nuances of the old "School of Seeing", which

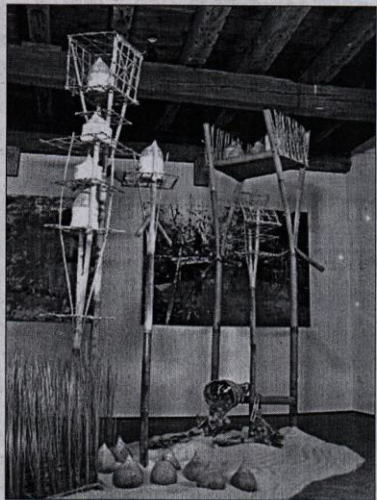


JPIAmir Sidharta

Work by three of four artists participating at the Venice Biennale: Sacred Prayer for the Dead by Tisna Sanjaya (above); 11 Juni 2002 by Arahmaiani (below) and Dream Land by Made Wianta (below right). The work by Dadang Kristanto, Anginpun Ikut Menangis (Even the Wind Cries) is not shown here. Despite financial problems, the artists finally represented the country at the prestigious event, which lasts until November.



JPIAmir Sidharta



JPIAmir Sidharta

stems from the influence of Dutch painters.

When Chinese and Korean artists entered the Western market 10 years ago, their preoccupation with modern art was still ongoing. Indonesian artists, though, had already been through this period of development before they had even debuted here, a good prerequisite for a better understanding of their work.

But the market is another story. The huge interest in Chinese art, for example, depends much on the economic relevance that China holds for Germany. As China became more and more important as a trading partner, Germans started to become more and more interested in its socio-cultural background. Such a perception of Indonesia does not exist here.

**How did you become interested in Indonesian art?**

My first contact with Asian art was when I met Chinese artist Liu Chingung in 1992. This meeting heralded many small — then larger — exhibitions and curatorial projects for East Asian artists. In 1999, I was offered an opportunity to curate the work of two Indonesian artists, Arahmaiani and Khrisna Murti, for the first time. Because of the good response, we intensified our engagement with Indonesia.

If you look at the art produced in the West over the last 20 years, you will find mainly self-referential pieces with neither heart nor soul.

The "Other" artists break this trend — meaning that their art is still generated from within, but also include a socio-political statement, a comment about the surrounding environment.

**Is it difficult to raise the interest of the Western public for these "Other" artists?**

Western art critics always follow the public perception, and people here are just not used to what they call archaism or mysticism



JPIChristina Schott

Ochs and Pruess Gallery owners Alexander Ochs (right) and wife, Jana Pruess. Specializing in East Asian art, Ochs and Pruess became involved in Indonesian art during an exhibition in 1999.

any more — nor are they used to any kind of political statement anymore. We have to approach them slowly, because if they are suddenly presented with a kind of art they have not seen for 20 years, it will be a shock.

People are also surprised about the great diversity of styles and languages that nevertheless have a common context regarding esthetics and content. They start asking themselves, "Is it an American comic or a traditional Javanese icon in the background — and where do the two blend?"

Some Indonesian artists, for example Tisna, are able to integrate external influences into their own individual culture and so develop an artistic language that is universally understandable, wherever they may live or exhibit.

So we always have a large crowd who come to see Indonesian artists and their work — because many people have learned to under-

stand their work by studying their backgrounds.

**What is your view on the future of Indonesian art?**

I do not believe in a "second wave of Asian art", as was promoted by the media last year when we organized *Awas!* (Watch Out!) — an exhibition of Indonesian contemporary artists in Germany curated by the Cemeti Art Foundation in Yogyakarta.

It is very simple: There is a very slow process of acceptance and integration of East and Southeast Asian artists in Europe. People just discovered Chinese art, and now everything is Chinese.

Change is always difficult. Therefore, we — the West — should learn to take artists as what they really are: individuals who do not always have to be shown in a limiting ethnic, geographical or political context.

For Indonesian art, the period of national shows at ethnological museums is definitely over.