

The last fifteen years have seen Indonesian contemporary art come to be recognised as significant and dynamic through its inclusion in a plethora of newly initiated international exhibitions. Major exhibitions of contemporary Asian art such as the *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennials*, the Queensland Art Gallery's *Asia-Pacific Triennials*, *Gwangju Biennial*, *Taiwan Biennial* and nationally or regionally focussed exhibitions organised by the Asia Society, the Japan Foundation and Singapore Art Museum have without doubt changed the way the world now views contemporary Indonesian art. This recent global awareness and appreciation of contemporary Indonesian art follows the comparable trajectories of Indonesia's regional neighbours such as Thailand and the Philippines. Such occurrences however cannot be seen in isolation from other historical and economic processes that have dominated this period: international exhibitions during the 1990s are part of a larger process of globalisation and can be seen as a response to the stimulation and pressure of global culture.

Recurring, regionally focussed initiatives by large institutions have played a demonstrable role in redrawing the global contemporary art map, a map that now actively and visibly includes contemporary Indonesian art. But does the articulation of contemporary Indonesian art have to remain filtered through these dominant First-World institutions? Has this articulation caused a particular narrative to be constructed? What are the ways in which Indonesian artists and curators can develop and present independent narratives, without the infrastructural might of a leading national institution?

In investigating these questions, this paper first examines the recent selection practice of Indonesian art for the international arena. Secondly it looks at the local mechanisms currently stimulating Indonesia's art discourse.

### I

Over the past decade most selection processes for several prominent exhibitions have been based on collaborative co-curatorship, but the crucial decisions regarding artist selections have rested primarily with curators from First-World countries like Australia and Japan. There have been a growing number of recent initiatives, like the Japan Foundation's *Under Construction*, 2002, which have enabled intra-regional dialogue, selection and exhibition, but recurring large-scale international exhibitions showcasing contemporary art from Indonesia, have to date occurred outside the Southeast Asian region. The question then to ask is, who is the audience? Will the selection for such exhibitions be influenced by the curators' notion of audience? It seems inevitable that this must be the case, given that the curator is working as an intermediary between artists and their creative context, and institutions with their concerns about viewership statistics, public access, pedagogical and political values, and so on.

As a corollary comes the question of narratives: what stories and whose stories are being told? Does including the "Other," the exotic, and "ness-es" (in this case, Indonesian-ness) continue to retain high currency in institutional policy? Or have audiences for these exhibitions reached such a mid-ground where they relate to these works as part of a sophisticated and

differentiated global discourse of contemporary art? If not, does this propagate a trend among artists in their quest for international inclusion, to try to fit the formula? And does it also compromise the aesthetic and ideological integrity of artists from this region who are already on this global circuit as it is a display of their Otherness, their Indonesian-ness, that they know is their edge?

A review of the Indonesian selections in prominent international events during the mid and late 1990s illustrates a definite propensity to include artists whose work predominantly addresses overt political themes and who have already been seen in major exhibitions. The proclivity in these international events to select work addressing themes of political and social injustice was undoubtedly influenced by the possibilities that opened up for a greater number of artists to focus on such themes during the fall of the New Order and subsequent *Reformasi* periods. However the near absence in international representation of other works, works that did not address such themes, does indicate the existence of an external force. This yet again raises the question of audience. Does there still exist a perception, conscious or otherwise, that works from Indonesia (similarly to works from other Asia-Pacific countries) should have a certain recognizable country "look" and address primarily national themes? That this is not a fundamental consideration in international exhibition selection from First-World countries denotes an imbalance in the processes of international selections and highlights the lack of a truly democratic global arts discourse.



Selection in high-profile exhibitions is something of a self-propagating phenomenon anywhere in the world. However in the Southeast Asian region, this tendency is all the more pronounced, with a select number of artists being repeatedly “picked up” for other global biennials and triennials. This occurrence of “curating through catalogues” is primarily due to inadequate, or in some cases nonexistent, fieldwork. Often, curators who purport to be globally informed are working from inadequate knowledge bases in contemporary art practices and discourses in Indonesia and its region.

## II

Increasingly over the past decade, a number of projects driven by local curators and artists have forged stronger local, regional and global networks. The emergence of significant research programs, critical writing and publications has assisted the development of a critical dialogue about current trajectories. It is also imperative to recognise that the development of local art discourse and activity does not have to rely on replicating the Western structure of institutions. It is the establishment of systems that function

effectively within the existing frameworks that is of greater significance within the Indonesian context.

Over the last decade, it has become apparent that varying organisations and initiatives have fulfilled roles usually accepted as responsibilities of state institutions in countries like Australia. Cemeti Art House (formerly named Cemeti Gallery) and Cemeti Art Foundation have played pivotal roles in this area. Cemeti's pursuit of alternate artistic activities, processes and exchanges has continued to foster flexibility, difference and openness in an industry chiefly directed by the economics of speculative investment. Cemeti Art House's anniversary exhibition *Exploring Vacuum* fittingly integrates a number of these longstanding commitments with focus on process, cross-disciplinarily exchange and community participation. Simultaneously, Cemeti Art Foundation's research, documentation archive, publications and art education program has provided an invaluable mechanism for increasing knowledge, debate and networks on local and global levels. However, the strength and achievements of Cemeti Art House have not been free from censure; it has often been regarded

as the solitary alternate voice and criticised for being hegemonic. M. Dwi Marianto observed in 2001, “Cemeti Art House is now hegemonic as a result of their overly ‘a priori’ and ideological observance of phenomena in Yogyakarta.” Undeniably however, the Gallery/Art House filled a void by offering the first and continuing alternate, critical voice. Additionally, its dominance has helped generate other voices, being noted as the inspiration for the founding of other alternative spaces in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta.

There are recent initiatives that offer further mechanisms for placing Indonesian contemporary art within the global framework. Initiatives, including Ruang Rupa in Jakarta and the Bandung Centre for New Media Art, concentrate on new media projects, exchanges and networks and frequently initiate local/international collaborations. These initiatives work with the realisation that through web-based and new media projects they are able to maintain connections at varying levels, forming workable networks that generate local and international projects and discourse irrespective of economic and infrastructural might. Other spaces, like



the Goethe Institute and French-Indonesian Cultural Institutes, offer, although select and country-specific, the display within Indonesia of some international contemporary art.

There is also an active movement to establish recurring, curatorially driven exhibitions within Indonesia, accompanied by well-documented and professionally produced publications. As Rizki A. Zailani states in his introductory essay of the *Interpellation: CP Open Biennale 2003* catalogue "When the state's bureaucracy is notor [sic], perhaps not yet able to organise its wealth so that it can support and develop infrastructures for the art, the 'fate' of the art development cannot be supported by strong and capable organisations. As a result, various artistic events are held with neither co-ordination or long term plans." The 2003 CP Biennale provides evidence of an emerging collective movement to change the current structure. Further evidence of this endeavour can be identified in the planning invested in the forthcoming *2003 Yogyakarta Biennale* [This essay was written before the opening of the Yogyakarta Biennale in mid October 2003, Ed.] The actual establishment of the privately-funded CP Foundation, its breadth of program and stated objective "to actively participate in developing a new understanding of the 'international world'" are clearly illustrative of a will to alter the mechanisms of the past and gain more control of one's own contemporary art trajectory, particularly within global articulations.

The role of collecting and preserving Indonesia's modern and contemporary art has primarily been performed by private collectors. Although

the selection and purchase of works through this mechanism usually lacks curatorial collection directives and remains driven by economic currency and susceptible to the vagaries of personal taste, several major collectors are fulfilling a number of significant functions. They are aware of the importance of professionally documenting and conserving their collections for the future and, importantly, command considerable influence over the collection practice of their rivals. Additionally the market's prestige, competitiveness and lucrateness have encouraged collectors to purchase Indonesian modern and contemporary works from international collectors, hence bringing important works back to Indonesia.

Without the backing of a supportive state infrastructure, the active development of Indonesia's contemporary art discourse will always be problematic. Organisations and individuals taking on and performing key roles, unofficially, will inevitably face difficulties inherent to decentralised systems. However the lack of boundaries and criteria can provide stimuli for the development and realisation of innovative initiatives which in due course affect larger trajectories. Undoubtedly First-World institutions that host major regional exhibitions direct considerable power and influence, but they need to remain committed to seeing, reading, listening to and being informed by their local colleagues. The mechanisms presently at play in Indonesia are increasingly carrying influence and generating audible voices in the international presentation and promotion of artists' work and local discourses.

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## Eko Prawoto

### Architecture and art: an explorative spirit



It can be said that architectural production in Indonesia has been quite significant. This was especially true for the pre-financial crisis period. However, as senior architects often complained, architectural design of high quality is very difficult to find. It is production without reflection. This is, of course, a subjective judgement from the viewpoint of architecture as a cultural undertaking. However, the perspective can take the opposite vantage point: See the production of real estate, condominiums, malls, and even super-malls — it is all extremely progressive, isn't it? Yet, is there any element of cultural investment involved? This is just a comment.

This distinction is important, considering that most architectural production is dominated by the sole emphasis of the economic aspect. Overwhelming service to the market taste has rendered architecture a mere commodity, similar to shoes, clothes, cars...

This is, perhaps, not necessarily a situation to lament, knowing that in the course of history architecture has always been used by "the ruling power" for the purpose of displaying itself. Perhaps one may even say that there is "nothing wrong" with what has been going on, since the grip of the hegemonic power of the market is obvious.

The struggle to detach oneself from the market, but at the same time to join it is an eternal dialectic issue. It is like surfing: the absence of huge waves spoils the game, but the danger of being swept away by them can be fatal. Such an issue was once a lively topic of discussion in the art world. Artists have, perhaps, developed some advanced strategies in living with it.

Architects also attempted to open sufficient "space" in the game. Some decades ago, the discourse of exploring the identity of the so-called *Nusantara* architecture obsessed the minds of Indonesian architects. However, at that time, the drive to explore this identity was coloured more by "fear" and pessimism in perceiving the future, so that architecture meant no more than preserving (reiterating) the mere physical features of existing architecture. The fervour to promote cultural preservation was short-lived, owing to the increased number of young architects educated, trained, and nurtured in the global mainstream culture and language. This should by no means be considered necessarily negative.

Several observers of culture see that the tendency toward a "homogenised" language of art resulting from the strength of the global market media (including architecture) needs to be counterbalanced by a spirit of positive and creative resistance that preserves local heritage. "Local knowledge, global perspective", people say.

In this perspective, it seems that architects must learn from artists. At least with regard to the persistent fervour to open-mindedly explore and regain cultural foundations and roots. Practising architecture must have something to do with living life culturally; re-examining local culture with new inner eyes, not just as formal conventions, but, instead, as representing universal spirits and values. The mediating role of art in shaping human beings with increased awareness of their humanity may provide a reference for architectural explorations in Indonesia.

In current cultural and artistic dynamics, Cemeti Art House is playing a significant role. It is more than a mere display case. In its mission to give mediation to artists/art-workers through its creative curatorial concepts, it has continually offered elaborate ideas, strategies, as well as explorations of alternatives towards actualising cultural awareness. It is essential to keep this spirit from being negligently swept away by global market waves; those enormous waves that would immediately sink and strand us, leaving us to be just spectators or passive consumers. No way. We must create space for ourselves to act and take roles. It is this role that galleries in general rarely assume.

Cemeti Art House may be likened to a laboratory that actively and creatively produces vaccines for art's nerves to keep us from quiet oblivion and extinction, and instead, broadens our horizons to think and to hope that alternatives do exist.

Are there any other institutions in this republic that open up and disseminate optimism as art institutions do, while, on the other hand, other institutions, such as political, legal, and even religious ones, offer only gloom and terror?

Thoughts of art creation need to be communicated and made public. Art is one of the forms of public space where we share thoughts and feelings in our coexistence as human beings.

In this aspect, architecture lags behind. Very rarely is the explication of an architectural practice widely communicated. This is despite the fact that the impact of an architectural work is significant, as it concerns not only the owner or user of the building, but also



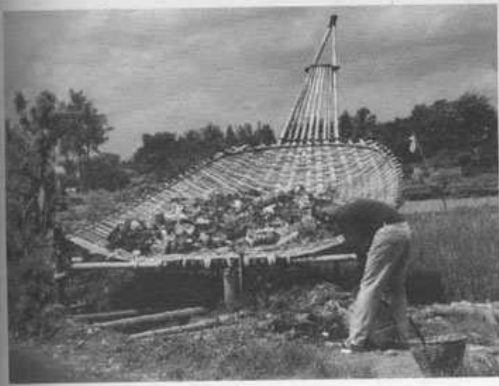
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involves a wider spatial and temporal scale. Poor designs, faulty city planning policies, or destroyed nature — whose responsibility are they?

Public participation in architectural materialisation needs to be developed. Architecture is not closed and exclusive, reserved only for architects. Architectural exhibitions? Why not? Explications of ideas, studies, criticisms and studies, and explorations in architectural practice all need to be incorporated as an agenda in the dynamics of art practices.

Just a little wish: that Cemeti Art House in its prospective years will include architecture in its working agenda.

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*To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to it.*

-Santayana

In a flash, with this thought, George Santayana can amass the respect of lovers, observers and sponsors of visual arts in Indonesia for a visual arts exhibition. The assumption is that exhibitions present works that connect a person with beauty. There is nothing wrong with this assumption. But witnessing some of the exhibitions shown in Indonesia over the past ten years, it would certainly appear that there has been a shift in beauty, exhibitions, and in growth in visual arts too.

Recent visual arts exhibitions also demonstrate growth in aesthetic thinking, which has separated the values of "art" and "beauty". Aesthetics, even, neglects to talk about beauty, focusing instead on the "meaning", the "work" and the "appreciation" of art. The question of beauty, it would seem, has been "abandoned" and lives on only in "public consciousness". An exhibition, in truth, never expresses beauty in the pure sense that it is thought of in the "public consciousness". An exhibition is a "space of common interests". It is not only the artist that creates it. The exhibition space is not only a place to display art objects, which in themselves present a true form of beauty. It is a presentation of the creative process and the production of an artist, the output of which is known as a "work of art".

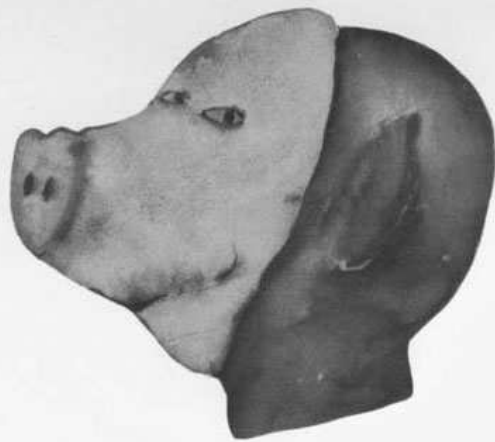
In terms of a creative process, a work embraces recognition of the artist as a creator who has goals and aspirations. Appreciation of an artwork is also an acknowledgement of the

artist. As a space for creation, an exhibition is a "contest of subjectivity". So, it should be endorsed by the opinion or appraisal, of the artist, curator, exhibition manager, critics and observers. Here, it is impossible for there to be an "absolute truth", even as to the value of beauty as perceived by the public. The process of interaction, negotiation, and understanding is, first and foremost, the appreciation of its value.

As a production process, each work involves manufacturing procedures that combines needs with certain media, tools, processes and work energy, which accumulate as the value of capital and interests. As a production process space, an exhibition is a space for negotiation and exchange. An accumulation of the value of capital and interests for interaction, negotiation, and assessment for the producers (artists, gallery owners/managers), mediators (curators, art observers, gallery owners/managers, art auctioneers) and consumers (observers, art auctioneers, art collectors). In this case, an exhibition is more of a public thing, in the sense that it also depends on the interaction and character of a particular community. Here, it is possible to define what is "true" and "false" because, at a certain level, this relates to the privileges and responsibilities of a particular individual/organisation towards the public confidence entrusted in them. In a community that respects human rights and justice, manipulation of the process of the production of art – by and towards producers, mediators and consumers – is clearly unethical and amounts to a misuse of public confidence.

Clearly, it is impossible to separate the aspects of creation and production of an exhibition. Focusing on and clearly defining one or the other would be seen as tantamount to "treason". A person who feels he or she is a genius because he imagines himself to be an expert and a creator of values – including the value of beauty – is clearly in denial of his debt to the process and to social relations. Conversely, people who just hone their skills to be astute simply at calculating capital and interests for the sake of profits, also deceive themselves as to their own worth and subjectivity.

In today's space of interests, exhibiting visual art invites challenges and battles, conflicts and resistance. This is not by way of a reproach that art has drawn a line with beauty. The problem is the perennial, and perhaps unsettling, question of "what is the function of art?" Commenting on discussion of "third world visual art" in the situation of interests known as the "global world", Sean Cubitt reminds us again that "what art does is mediate"<sup>1</sup>. What art does is mediate our convictions and perceptions about the values of good, beauty and truth. Along the same lines, Santayana suggests that: beauty is outside a person and is the perception of that person when he succeeds in recognising it through his awareness (thus, "feeling" is also a form of awareness). Yet, "art and "beauty" becomes a complex problem when they have to be placed in a process of identification and category of understanding. So today we have discovered multifarious "arts and "beauties", which are recognised as types and categories, precisely because humans desire to enrich their



understanding of these through art philosophy, history, critique and theory.

We recognise today that perceptions of beauty are also determined by social and cultural constructs: as an example, what is beautiful to a Javanese is not necessarily so to a Dutch person. But this does not mean, for example, that there are two kinds of beauty. The difference resulting from the two different cultures lies in the type and construction of perceptions and understanding, rather than a difference in what "beauty" is. So, there is still room for common ground for these differences in the construction of perceptions. A work of art may mediate various issues related to the values of goodness, beauty or truth, that convinces two people from different social and cultural backgrounds.

As visual art practices and forms may be differentiated in terms of type, so too can the name, form and *modus operandi* of an exhibition space. But not so, the experiencing of beauty. "To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to it", said Santayana. So, how this beauty is presented and is felt is the challenge and battle for each of the parties that want to exhibit visual art. This, of course, is applicable not only to every curator and exhibition space management, but also to the participating artists who want to present the process of creation/production of their works in a space of collective interests, and to art critics/commentators who want to call attention to visual arts for their collective understanding.

How does one explain the feeling of beauty? Again, I recall the words of Sean Cubitt:

*Art's promise of a different mode of relationship between people is constantly broken by the intervention of an institutional organization that presumes to know, in advance, what is being communicated, by whom and to whom<sup>2</sup>.*

Of course, "beauty" can be understood – can be "felt" – although it is not necessarily an easy and enjoyable process. Art allows a person to find a way to accept and understand the feeling of beauty, and, at a deeper level, to connect the different people who experience it. But as Cubitt says, an institutional organisation – be it an art academy, museum, gallery, association of artists or critics, association of curators, or the Department of Art and Tourism – will inevitably take control. Whatever the age, I think, there will always be institutions that take control and exercise power. The question is why and for what purpose is this done? The words of Sean Cubitt again remind us of our present day setting:

*Standing in the zone between people, that space so often dominated by money and power, art offers another way, a praxis-based method of relating<sup>3</sup>.*

For us in Indonesia today, at a time when riches are enjoyed only by the few, power is what everyone longs for, and when celebration of differences is easily manipulated, it is natural that the practice and appreciation of art is expected to offer us another way. A way that reminds us of the relationship between the values of beauty and truth and goodness.

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#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup>Professor Sean Cubitt is a lecturer in screen and media studies at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. He is the author of *Digital Aesthetics* (1998) and *Simulation and Social Theory* (2000). See Sean Cubitt, PROLOGUE, In the Beginning: *Third Text* and the Politic of Art, Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, Ziauddin Sardar, ed. *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*, 2002, Continuum. London – New York, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*