

# Chapter 1: Introduction

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*“At the time, it didn’t cross my mind that these were readymade or found objects. Neither was I thinking of Duchamp, although I knew of him. My focus at the time was how presenting new forms (can) raise social issues using visual elements from day to day life, with the idea: one, daily objects (without changing their meaning) would be easily be understood by observers so that would be more communicative; two, daily objects are visual elements that cannot be identified as a form of fine art; and three, daily objects can represent the spirit of experimenting and playing around.”*

FX Harsono

*“The development of such a conceptual strategic language, however, situated the work of these artists (Latin American) in a paradoxical relation to a fundamental principle of European and North American conceptual art: the dematerialization and its replacements by a linguistic or analytic proposal. Latin American artists inverted this principle through a recovery of the object, in the form of the mass produced Duchampian Readymade, which is the vehicle of their conceptual program. ..Following Duchamp, the artists were concerned not so much with the production of artistic objects, but the appropriation of already existing objects or forms as part of broad strategies of signification.”*

Mari Carmen Ramirez

## CHAPTER 1.1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The 1999 AWAS (Beware): Recent Art from Indonesia show was a seminal event in Indonesian art history. Recognized by many as a breakthrough, it crowned the new stars of the Indonesian contemporary--Agus Suwage, Agung Kurniawan, S Teddy, Tisna Sanjaya, and the collectives Taring Padi, Apotik Komik. In the words of the art historian Marianto : *“New, direct, bold, honest and articulate sub-languages have emerged as tools for criticizing and even laughing at the wounds of Indonesian society. The very nature of Indonesian art is changing just as the nation transforms itself.”* (Queensland Art Gallery 1999, 58)

But the show was marred by conflicts. An international travelling exhibition, it first started in Melbourne, Australia, as the Australian run Indonesian Arts Society was the first to host it. The Australians produced a catalogue, but the Cemeti curators dissented about the tone of the catalogue, disliking its over-emphasis on art activism, a dominant theme given the recent fall of the authoritarian New Order in the process known as *reformasi*.<sup>1</sup> They discarded large sections of the original catalogue, notably an essay by Astri Wright, and produced a new one.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Marxist art collective Taring Padi, who was one of the stars of the show, was extremely critical about the AWAS show's concept, criticizing "*the concept of 'recent art' as a euphemism for 'contemporary art', whereby contemporary art discourse represents new 'universalism' within Indonesian visual art discourse.*" (Arbuckle 2000, 56) If AWAS was the supposed triumph for Indonesian conceptual art and progressive politics, the reality was more ambiguous and problematic.

The polemics surrounding AWAS open a door to my thesis. I will chart the evolution of Indonesian conceptualism, conceived by the intellectuals and artists behind the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB) or New Art Movement of 1975, over the last thirty years. Its aesthetic strategy focused on the readymade as a means of communicating in a society which suffered from uneven economic development. I use the term readymade in the Duchampian sense where found objects in everyday life are recontextualized as art objects. Readymades question art as an institution, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Cemeti was an independent arts space based in Jogja. Run by Nidityo and his wife Mella, Cemeti commissioned the AWAS project, which we will go into detail in chapter 5

<sup>2</sup> AWAS ran from December 1999 to April 2002, almost three years. Traveled to Jakarta, Jogja, Melbourne, Cairns, Wollongong, Sydney, Canberra, Hokkaido, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Aachen.

the problem of commodities and mass culture. The readymade in Indonesia, like its Latin American brethren, also addressed power and domination in society.

Several problems complicated our understanding of Seni Konseptual, my name for the Indonesian version from now on. Firstly, it has not been understood as conceptualism *per se*, namely because its ideologues like Jim Supangkat have over-emphasized its opposition to modernist painting and the academy. Practitioners have driven Seni Konseptual aesthetic strategies, but only recently have their voices have been seldom heard directly. Only since 1996 have art historians dealt with Seni Konseptual on its own terms, as opposed to seeing it as postmodernism. They have used comparisons with conceptualism in Latin America, which are more evolved and self conscious: a direction which this paper will continue.

Secondly, Seni Konseptual's engagement with politics has been severely misunderstood. Its ideologues were historically apathetic, as opposed to the practitioners. Seni Konseptual has often been confused with various liberal art and activism movements during the Suharto period, which has been the focus of many foreign art critics. But more importantly, Indonesia has a history of Kerakyatan art or people's art, whose artists operated in parallel. The polemic between Taring Padi and the AWAS illustrates the gulf in approaches towards politics and art between the conceptualist and the kerakyatan traditions. Articulating a conceptualist approach to politics is long overdue.

Like Latin American conceptualism, Seni Konseptual deals with issues with asymmetries of modernization. Postmodern Indonesian critic Zaelani explains this agenda:

*“Since the exhibition, ‘The Great World Market of Fantasy – the New Art Movement’, the practice of contemporary art and its analysis has been pushing the creative process out from the ‘subtle’ area of the artist towards the issue of culture. We are definitely discussing a type of ‘art of revolt’ (Kristeva) ... If we now are investigation the ‘orientation’ of art practice, then the path to explaining it lies in the area culture, as a struggle in the community in response to the experience and hopes of becoming modern. Of course, we could discuss the expression postmodernism or the post industrial condition to explain contemporary Indonesian art practice, but Indonesia’s presently changing reality hauntingly reminds us again of a number of Indonesian modernization projects (state), industrialisation (social) and capitalism (economic). Contemporary Indonesian art has experienced all of these; and is beginning to develop an explanation of modernity a la Indonesia.” (Zaelani 2000, 20)*

I agree with Zaelani that GSRB was the origin of Indonesian contemporary or more appropriately conceptual art. The tendency to continue to define the Indonesian Konseptual as revolt is a huge disservice to the artists like Harsono and Bonyong who have evolved sophisticated aesthetic strategies dealing with the problems of modernization. However, Zaelani’s focus on culture is very narrow. At its best, Seni Konseptual dealt with culture through the concept of hegemony which linked culture with political domination, a huge step between the identity politics of culture, popular with the postmodernists.

## CHAPTER 1.2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Indonesian art history has been disproportionately influenced by three individuals, Claire Holt, Astri Wright, and Jim Supangkat. Most scholarship reacts to their seminal influences. For the last three decades, Indonesian intellectuals outside of Supangkat have only been heard sporadically through short, cryptic essays, not noted for consistency and interpretative consistency. Ironically, there were great domestic intellectuals on art, the sociologist Arief Budiman and the art historian Sanento Yuliman. But their influential essays, for example in the two key GSRB catalogues, were not translated and circulated in the global biennale circuit. Hence, they remain unknown. Seni Konseptual has often been confused with the agenda of Jim Supangkat, a very influential member of GSRB. Supangkat became the main mediator between contemporary Indonesian art and the global circuit in the nineties. To put it mildly, key practitioners, especially Harsono were very critical of Jim's views, particularly his lumping of conceptualism with postmodernism, as we will see in the chapter about the Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup> Biennale.

Only recently has the Indonesian voice been heard through a new generation of social theory trained sociologists and curators take to the stage. Their essays in the 2009 show *Beyond the Dutch* mark a new level of sophistication, detail, and voice, missing in fifty years of Indonesian art history dominated by foreigners and local hacks. This contrasts with the gallery sponsored curatorial work associated with the current boom in the Indonesian art market. Many self congratulatory, promotional essays, complete with postmodern jargon, proliferate. The main exception is work

from the Langgeng Art Foundation, who has commissioned retrospectives on Harsono, Heri Dono, and Agus Suwage. This work is characterized by very detailed archival work and oral interviews.

Before arrival of the Dutch East India company, the archipelago consisted of diverse linguistic groups and their kingdoms. There was a rich tradition of local art, broadly described as traditional. Depending on class structure, the art produced from rural craft traditions differed from those from the high art of the feudal Javanese courts. (Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* 1967) In the 1700s, the Dutch East India company begin colonizing the small kingdoms in the Java. By 1900s, the bulk of Indonesia, with the exceptions of small parts of Bali, was under Dutch rule.

Indonesian modern art originated with Raden Saleh, a Javanese prince who lived aboard in Europe and studied court painting in Paris. Originally dismissed as a hack churning romantic paintings for European patrons, he is now acclaimed as a proto nationalist who subverted Western painting for nationalist messages. (Krauss 2006)<sup>3</sup> That said, Western styled painting in the nineteenth century Indonesia consisted of romantic landscapes about the pastoral Indonesian environment, catered to Dutch colonialist buyers. This school of art is commonly known as Mooi or 'Beautiful Indies'.

By the thirties, the ideas of nationalism began penetrating the art world. The expat artists had trained local Indonesians in their techniques. This led to a group of

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<sup>3</sup>I feel the return to Raden Saleh has been excessive to say the least. Seng's use of him as a conceptualist is a historic at best. Supriyanto deals with a similar issue in his essay in *Beyond the Dutch*, where Heri Dono interprets Saleh

Indonesian painters led by Sudjojono issuing a manifesto calling for an art which engaged the reality of the common people.. While Sudjojono's critique was easily on target—orientalist pastorals are hard to defend, he opened the door to other problems which will bedevil Indonesian art going forward.

Given romantic pastoralism is the art of the colonialist, what was the art of the Indonesians? On one hand, Sudjojono argued for realism, although with little of rigidity later associated with the social realism seen later in China and the Soviet Union. But he also imbued the concept with some degree of mysticism, talking about a type of Indonesian soul, infusing the art work with emotion). Arbuckle sums this contradiction up well:

*“Central to Sudjojono’s writings and the Persagi movement, was the notion that the painter had to reveal one’s inner spirit, or jiwa ketok. In the development of Indonesian painting jiwa ketok has been used to inscribe individual spirituality to the aesthetic painting. However, reconsidering the concept of jiwa ketok in relation to the nationalist period and the content of Sudjojono’s writings offers an alternative meaning of jiwa ketok. Central to Sudjojono’s writing was the concept that a painter had to be a nationalist and express the truth of the daily struggles of the people.”* (Arbuckle 2000, 11)

Claire Holt is considered the definitive scholar on this problem. Besides the dichotomy of self indulgent pastoralism and art for the common people, Holt rightly emphasized the dichotomy between universalism and Indonesianess. But unlike Arbuckle, she too easily agrees with Sudjojono's solution, a strange sense of Indonesianess, which others have more critically describe as a provincial lyricism (Mashadi 2007) This Holtian lyricism drives much of foreign scholarship in Indonesia, as well as domestic perception of the fine arts. In particular, Astri's Wright sees history of modern and contemporary Indonesian art as reclaiming a sense of



essential Indonesian identity, defined as a type of Javanese mysticism. (Wright, Soul, Spirit and Mountain 1994) Ironically, Holtian lyricism is practiced by all sides of the political spectrum. In the depoliticized universities of the Suharto seventies, the art academy pushed a type of decorativism mixed with Indonesianess. On the other hand, Astri Wright also advocated the entire art as activism mode, oblivious to any contradictions with the use of Javanese hierarchy by the New Order.

Holt was also obsessed by characterizing painting in term of styles, conflating them with ideological movements. She contrasted the difference between Mooi Indies and the social realism of Persagi. Later scholarship has suggested that stylistic polarities may be simplistic, particularly Krauss' analysis of Raden Saleh. But the emphasis on style is seen in subsequent scholarship. A majority Indonesian art scholarship focuses on painting styles: psychological expressionism (Wright, Soul, Spirit and Mountain 1994), international modernism (Spanjaard, Modern Indonesian Painting 2003) and decorativism.

The most pernicious influence of this style focus is the vast amounts of scholarship devoted to a very marginal school of art in the eighties post the Konceptual revolt. The Jogja surrealism movement was driven more by the demands for painting commodities by a speculative, domestic market than anything. (Hujatnikajennong, The Contemporary Turns: Indonesian Contemporary Art of the 80s 2010) Artists like Ivan Sagito, Dede Es Supria, and Lucia Hartini produced photo-realistic like pictures with surreal or dreamy components. For good measure, they added Bandung abstraction into melange. The subjects varied, but included street children.

Australian academic Jenifer Dudley wrote about Lucia Hartini, a feminist surrealist. Dudley reads activist components to the style, suggesting that the repression of the New Order pushed artists to in between spaces, quoting Homi Bhaba. She even argues they laid the framework for reformasi. (Dudley 2000) Supangkat takes a more semiotic approach, suggesting that the use of the imagery of mass consumerism was important in its own right. (Supangkat, Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond 1997) But very few wanted to say the obvious: it was a step backward. This Holtian driven emphasis on painting styles castrated much of nineties art history scholarship, as critics focused on minute evolutions of the dominant, sterile painting styles, as opposed to the breakthroughs of the Conceptualists.

Sudjojono led a collective of artists known as Persagi who aligned themselves with the nationalists. In 1945, the Indonesians broke out in revolt against the Dutch who were severely weakened by German occupation in their homeland and Japanese occupation in Indonesia. By 1949, the nationalists won and the country won, with the prestige of art high given the alignment of Persagi with the revolution. The artists were enshrined in the new academies of art learning, ASRI Akademie Seni Rupa Indonesia, later known as ISI Institute Seni Indonesia; and ITB, Institut Teknologi Bandung. Artists like Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, and Affandi were acclaimed by the state and their countrymen.

Under nationalist leader Soekarno, Indonesia underwent a hectic period of nation building characterized by extreme factionalism in the country, with various political parties and fact ions from the Islamists, liberals, Catholics, the military, and the

communists jockeying for power. Given the engagement of artists in real life, many artists were aligned with various cultural organizations aligned with the various parties. The largest of these cultural organizations was LEKRA, affiliated with the communist party. One key feature of LEKRA is their dedication to develop “Kerakyatan” or people’s art. At some level, Kerakyatan is a logical legacy of Sudjojono’s great debate; art has to serve the common people. LEKRA also see art as a tool to educate the lower classes, be it the workers or the farmers in Indonesia’s case, in the class struggle. Fifties Indonesia was a very open, contested political environment with various parties fighting it out under the broad umbrella of Soekarno. Art was a weapon.

As mentioned before, Sudjojono’s ambiguities led both to a lyricism, but also a harder emphasis on institutional learning. Dealing with social issues saw artists organize themselves in informal learning groups or sanggars.<sup>4</sup> It also saw them affiliate with political organizations. This history of art and politics was integral to the development of Indonesian art history and was unique in the level of depth compared to rest of Southeast Asia. Consequently, there is an entire school of scholarship which approaches art history from this institutional, usually activist angle. The Australian scholar Keith Foulcher has been the eminent chronicler of LEKRA, a difficult task given the New Order government systematically erased memory of LEKRA and the communists in general post the 1965 coup. While Foulcher did not focus on the visual arts per se, he was a powerful influence on

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<sup>4</sup> Juliastuti defines a sanggar as collective space where members share their learning experiences under the auspices of a highly respected mentor

Australian academics studying Indonesian culture. Vivianne Hillyer wrote a thesis about Moelyono's art conscientization practice, conscious of the legacy of LEKRA. Heidi Arbuckle's thesis lays out the explicit influence on LEKRA on the collective Taring Padi, who not only followed the agenda of creating art for the oppressed classes, but literally revived the LEKRA woodprint style. Recently, Antariska wrote the controversial bahasa book about LEKRA.<sup>5</sup> At some level, Maklai's definitive work on GSRB in the seventies also follows this tradition.

The Kerakyatan scholarship is very important on two levels. Firstly, the entire Queensland and Asia Pacific Triennial ideology certainly owes its *raison d'état* to this line of scholarship. While keeping the explicit linkages quiet, the New Order remained paranoid to the very end; Queensland saw art as a vehicle of the oppressed. In the words of Carolyn Turner, the artistic director of APT in the nineties:

*"Over the past decade, many artists in the Asia-Pacific region have protested colonialism and neo-colonialism, and neo-colonialism, global environmental degradation; cultural loss; illness due to poverty; sexual exploitation; social and political injustice; war, violence, and racism. Their work is in the broad area of social justice. In confronting such issues, artists have addressed their art to, and involved, whole communities to help them confront poverty and trauma... and preserve traditions and values: in other words, their art contributes to cultural survival" (Turner 2004, 4)*

Not surprisingly, activist artists like Moelyono, Dadang Christanto, and Semsar Siahaan were preferred in APT.<sup>6</sup> While an art history focusing on art and the oppressed is certainly very valid and a necessary counterweight to the jargon of the

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<sup>5</sup> Tuan Tanah Kawin Muda: Hubungan Seni Rupa-Lekra 1950-1965

<sup>6</sup> The three artists mentioned above were educated in the eighties. They were not direct members of the New Art movement, but had strong activist agendas in their arts, although not of the conceptualist variety. We will go into depth on Moelyono in chapter 3, focusing on his connection with the kerakyatan tradition.

postmodernists, the entire Kerakyatan School and their Queensland lite fellow travellers had a fairly simplistic view about power. While the absurd thugs of the New Order were in power, it was easy to romanticize the masses. I will argue Seni Konseptual had a more nuanced view on power and hegemony, allowing more insights to the troubled developments in Indonesia post the fall of the New Order in 1998.

In 1965, tired of the chaos under Sukarno, the army launched a coup and purged society. This took the form of the mass killing of communists and their supporters, mass jailings. Activisms of all form in society were discouraged and LEKRA was destroyed. Art left the streets and countryside; and returned to the academy. The country went on the path on a neoliberal economic development under the authoritarian guidance of the Soerharto: otherwise, known as the New Order. The art world was split between the modernist abstraction of ITB and the residual social realist of ASRI. Reams of ink have been spilled about their contrasting aesthetic strategies. Western modernism, with all its bombastic triumphalism of the Clement Greenberg variety did show up in Bandung.<sup>7</sup> But how much real significance did it have for Indonesian society, a point brought up ad nauseam by GSRB, is a fair comment, particularly compared to Kerakyatan. One of the travesties of Indonesian art history, mainly due to the Holtian obsession with styles, is lack of perspective about minor styles, as compared to art executed by non-professionals, be it LEKRA or the students in the Jogja Binal.

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<sup>7</sup> The US pushed abstract expressionist art forms overseas in the fifties and sixties, competing with the Soviet Union for the loyalty of the third world. Many of these forms found a receptive audience in Bandung, which was build around a technology university.

Modernism, with its empathy for technology and political apathy, fit the New Order regime with its technocratic pretensions well. (Maklai-Miklouho 1991) That said, ASRI was hardly marginalized, retaining much prestige but lost in tired decorative painting. The legacy of Sudjojono or this inner spirit was used to justify the proliferation of paintings churned out by the academic hacks.

In 1975, the art students revolted. They called their movement Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru or the New Art Movement. We will go into detail about GSRB in chapters 2-3. Maklai is the definitive historian to date of GSRB. She is very strong on the political context and the linkage with the student movements. What were the scholarly interpretations of GSRB? Maklai focuses on the art and activism angle, but she is a minority. The majority of Indonesian scholars focus on some poststructuralist type interpretation. Employing French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of institutional power, later elaborated by Edward Said for the study of the orient, they see GSRB as a revolt against the institution of the art academy. Sumartono adopts a certain Mandarin aloofness to this Foucaultian view, even justifying the absurdity of the institutional view. (Sumartono 2001) Zaelani puts the revolt in the context of decadence and arrogance of the existing art establishment. Marianto is poor on general theory or historical context, and spends more time on artist autobiographies.

Ironically, this form of analysis was only taken up by Singapore art historians in the late nineties to identify the significance of GSRB. In 2006, Ahmad Mashadi did an ambitious retrospective about Asian conceptualisms called *Telah Terbit*. Mashadi identified GSRB Black December revolt as the beginning of an Indonesian

conceptualism focused on reform or reconceptualising art forms. (Mashadi 2007)

Besides explicitly linking GSRB to conceptualism, as opposed to postmodernism, Mashadi also puts it in a larger Southeast Asian and global context. We will consider some of Mashadi's argument in Chapter 2. Then Seng Yu Jin attempts builds upon this insight, defining the difference between Indonesian conceptualism from its Euro American and third world brethren. (Seng 2009) Building from Luis Camnitzer's argument that Latin American conceptualism was distinguished by an embrace of the sensorial and Lucy Lippard's theory of dematerialization of the object in North America, Seng goes on to describe Indonesian variety Seni Kontekstual (Contextual Art):

*“Seni Kontekstual... employed local materials and contexts to make art objects, as well as a performance as a strategy to subvert authoritarian power...a conceptualist strategy that draws on local materials imbued with culturally specific meanings to make art objects...The dematerialization of art was a rejection of the material construction of art for the conceptual production and dissemination of ideas, a dominant conceptualist movement from 1966-1977 in Euro America. Dematerialization of art did not occur in Seni Kontekstual.” (Seng 2009, 207)*

Seng's theory marks a major step forward in identifying the unique aesthetic strategy of Seni Konseptual to be the focus on the readymade objects. But Seng misses a critical nuance, which is exemplified in the figure of the eighties artist Moelyono. Seni Kontekstual did not have any monopoly on critique of power; in fact, it was subordinate to the entire Kerakyatan tradition at best. This nuance is very critical as we will see in the nineties generation artists where Seni Kontekstual imploded after the fall of the New Order.

This focus on resistance leads Seng to include the painter Raden Saleh as his other paradigm of Seni Kontekstual besides Harsono. Besides his prominence in the collecting pantheon, Raden Saleh, an early Romantic painter with nationalist sympathies was a hundred years from the start of modernism. Seng analyzes a typical Mooi Indies piece, *The Eruption of Mount Merapi in the Day, Java*, painted in 1866. Using Astri Wright and Dadang Christanto as sources, he suggests that the volcano was a Javanese symbol that subversively elicited anti Dutch sentiment. Putting aside the obvious historicism in the method, Raden Saleh was almost two hundred years from any type of global conceptualism. Like many Indonesian art critics, Seng confuses the use of symbols with use of readymade art objects. The study of symbols has a history as long as art itself. The legendary art historian Erwin Panofsky offered a methodology on understanding the various levels of symbols in Renaissance art pieces.<sup>8</sup> Equating readymades with symbols confuses the uniqueness of the readymade, which is an object which ambiguously straddles between the world of life and that of art. I feel Seng makes this torturous inclusion of Saleh because of his secondary definition of Seni Kontekstual as Indonesian resistance to various authoritarianisms, be it Dutch colonialism and the New Order.

## **THESIS STATEMENT**

I want to argue the Indonesian form of conceptual art or Seni Konseptual was developed by the GSRB movement in the 1970s. The main aesthetic strategy used the readymade object as means for communication in a society experiencing uneven

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<sup>8</sup> The three levels were natural subject matter, iconography, and iconology. His best know work was *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*.



modernization. The readymade, in Duchampian term, is a found object in everyday, re-contextualized as art objects. Readymades question art as an institution, as well as the problem of commodities and mass culture. The readymade in Indonesia, like its Latin American brethren, also addressed power and domination in society. I develop the understanding of this aesthetic through the analysis of the art work of FX Harsono and that of Bonyong, a member PIPA, a radical subgroup associated with GSRB. I also argue that the significance of the practitioner's aesthetic strategy has been overlooked given the focus on the anti academicism of the GSRB ideologues. In the transitional eighties, Seni Konseptual developed unique approaches towards political engagement. I contrast the work of Harsono with those of Moelyono, an art activist associated with the Kerakyatan tradition. The GSRB 1987 Pasaraya Dunia show is examined in depth to understand how the strategy evolves from readymades to an understanding of mass culture. Finally, looking at Indonesian art in the nineties, I argue that Seni Konseptual triumphed through the adoption of its strategy by nineties generations artists in new ways. Firstly, they challenge the political hegemony of the New Order regime on the streets in the Jogja Binal in 1992. Later, they participated in the reformasi process through the Slot in the Box and AWAS exhibits in the late nineties.

### CHAPTER 1.3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In 1975-1978, the use of readymade object dominated the art work of GSRB. How did the aesthetic strategy address the problems of tradition and modernization?
2. In the 80s, conceptual art was dead, with the exception of certain experimental projects by Harsono and the LEKRA influenced Moelyono. How did they differ in their aesthetic practices and political critiques?
3. The collective GSRB 1987 Pasaraya Dunia (shopping world) was the great lost show in Indonesian art history. What were the aesthetic advances implied in the deconstruction of mass media and consumerism?
4. How did the nineties artists take the conceptual strategies of the readymade and apply them on the street? How did they challenge the hegemony of the New Order during the 1992 Jogja Binal?
5. The emergence of postmodernism in Indonesia was at the Jakarta 9th Biennale in 1993 curated by Jim Supangkat. What were the aesthetic and political differences between the conceptualists and the postmodernists?
6. The 1997 Cemeti Slot in the Box show; and internationally in the Awas Indonesian show in 1999 marked the triumph of the nineties generation activist artist. How did the shows advance the conceptual readymade strategies developed by GSRB? How did they advance the political critique seen in the Jogja Binal.

7. Did the limits of a theory of mass subjectivity in conceptualism cause disillusionment post the fall of the New Order?

## **CHAPTER 1.4: METHODOLOGY**

We are building a critical history of Indonesian conceptual art developments from around 1975 to 2002, a scope which has never been written before. Historically, the specificity of conceptualism has been subsumed in postmodernism or art and activism scholarship. Our baseline sources will be secondary history on this period by Wiyanto and Cemeti. We will complement these accounts by direct reference to catalogues, imagery, and correspondence found in the archives in the Indonesian Visual Art Archive and Cemeti at Jogjakarta. One key resource used will be a newly commissioned (by the author) translation of the 1987 Pasaraya Dunia catalogue, which is seldom seen even in its Bahasa format. Much analysis will also be focused on the 1992 Jogja Binal, 9<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Biennale 1993, the 1997 Slot in the Box and the 1999 Awas Shows.

Primary interviews with FX Harsono, S Teddy, Agung Kurniawan, and Nindityo were done. Parallel to the empirical research is developing a theoretical framework of Indonesian conceptualism. I build upon the work of Seng Yu Jin, Ahmad Mashadi, and various writers on Latin American conceptualism.

## CHAPTER 1.5: LIMITATIONS

A revisionist history of the last thirty years is necessarily ambitious. Part of the problem is that historical accounts and artist statements use different terms to refer to conceptual art strategies. I also deal with inconsistencies of positions over time. The postmodernists and the art activism schools also lump conceptual artists in their agendas, causing confusion. Using several artists to represent the nineties generation of artists may be ambitious. I also use certain liberty in assessing influence, given that much of it was indirect: Indonesia is not a text based culture.

On a more practical level, despite competence in Bahasa Indonesia, there are still many primary documents which I cannot read. Despite IVAA, the documentation still has holes and even IVAA is missing some seminal documents like the catalogue from the Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup> or the PIPA catalogues.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> IVAA is the Indonesian Visual Art Archive founded in the early 2000s in Jogja. It is a repository of documents, videos, and books

# Chapter 2: Black December, Revolts

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## CHAPTER 2.1: THE BIRTH OF THE READYMADE

In 1973-74, unrest broke out on the campuses of Indonesia. Students were frustrated with the restrictions on freedom, as well as the growing corruption associated with neoliberal development. The New Order regime was about a decade into its rule after the bloody coup of 1965. In line with its technocratic, neo-liberal agenda, it sought to depoliticize campuses where much of the factionalism and agitation of the Sukarno years take place.

In the art academy, the revolt was called Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru or the New Art Movement. GSRB levelled its critique against the hierarchies of academic art, arguing for the relevance of popular art forms and the need to engage real life. The movement began in Jogja in 1973 when the artist FX Harsono formed the Group of Five (Young Yogyakarta Artists) with Bonyong Munni Ardhi, Hardhi, Nanik Mirna, and Siti Adiati: students from ASRI. Several of this Group including Harsono and Bonyong walked out of the 1<sup>st</sup> Big Exhibition of Indonesian Painting in 1974, which later evolved into the Jakarta Biennale, protesting the reactionary preferences of the judges for *“decorative and consumerist”* works: a event now known as Black December. They sent a wreath to the closing ceremony stating *“our condolences for the death of Indonesian painting.”* Subsequently, Hardi and Harsono were suspended indefinitely by ASRI for mixing arts and politics.

Shortly in 1975, GSRB expanded as Bandung students, most notably Supangkat, from the faculties of painting and sculpture joined the original Jogja nucleus. They were advised by the art critic Sanento Yuliman, the intellectual mastermind of GSRB in the

eighties.<sup>10</sup> The movement transcended the supposed ideological split between the modernist Bandung school of ITB and the Jogjakarta social realism of ISI, suggesting the art historical obsession on styles may have been misguided.

GSRB catapulted themselves into notoriety with a show in August at TIM Jakarta. Supangkat's juxtaposition of a classical style bust of queen *Ken Dedes*, a symbol of the high culture of Majapahit empire, on top of a pedestal with a crude drawing of a jean clad girl with her fly unzipped hit many nerves.(see exhibit 1) Harsono's contributed *Paling Top*. (see exhibit 2) This readymade consisted of a plastic M-16 rifle mounted inside a box and enclosed in steel wired cage, with a hybrid slogan "*Paling Top*", meaning most top. Both Supangkat and Harsono were true to form to the GSRB manifesto:

*"In creating works of art, banishing as far as possible images having the special elements of art, like the elements of painting drawing. The totality of art exists in one category, visual elements which can be linked with elements of space, movement, time, etc. Thus all the activity which can be categorized in Indonesian art, although based on different aesthetics, for example, that which originates from traditional art, are in this way included in the concept, considered legitimate as living art" (Maklai-Miklouho, 113)*

In short, GSRB was attacking the dichotomy between high and low art. Firing a shot at the notion of the Indonesian avant garde based out in ASRI with its ties with the Indonesian nation, GSRB dismissed the exalted claims of high art realism or what Mashadi has called provincial lyricism. But too much analysis has ended at this revolt against high art and do not question their strategies further. Maklai sees it as a form

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<sup>10</sup> Yuliman disappeared from international art history due to an early death in the nineties and the lack of translation of his works to English. With a PhD from the Sorbonne, Yuliman supplied the serious intellectual insights which bridged aesthetic rebellion with broader social issues.



of pop art, so does Sumartono. But pop art with its fetishization of consumer objects is not exactly the same as conceptual art.

Ahmad Mashadi has a more ambitious answer: placing GSRB in a tradition of the revolts of Southeast Asian conceptualism in the 1970s, ranging from Roberto Chabet in the Philippines, Cheo Chai Hiang in Singapore, and Reza Piyadasa in Malaysia.

(Mashadi 2007) In Mashadi's narrative, conceptualism was one particular revolt against the dominant painting paradigms which dominated Southeast Asian art post independence. He describes these various revolts under the label of "*form*." In contrast, he lays out a parallel counter movement "*figure*", a turn towards a harder type of social realism, mainly from the Filipino left.

But Mashadi doesn't answer one nagging question: does the conceptualism of GSRB differ from those happening elsewhere in Southeast Asia or the world? I would like to argue that it does, but the typology of form and figure is not the framework to understand this.

Mashadi has trouble placing GSRB. While the juxtaposition of form and figure was noticeable in the Philippines, particularly in the debate between Chabet and the social realists. GSRB was a more hybrid animal. Besides Supangkat and Harsono, Mashadi zeroes in on the figure of Priyanto who drew very crude cartoons. (see exhibit 3). Very unlike the high minded conceptualism of Chabet which drew from Euro American models, GSRB had a very distinct low art and graphic design bent to it.

Harsono's *Paling Top* has a rough, readymade component to it. Harsono finds the plastic gun, the wire mesh, the box, and then decorates it with a hybrid street sign: "*Paling Top*", which meshes both Bahasa Indonesian and English. Supangkat was right that GSRB did installations, but they were uniquely Indonesian in that they were closer to readymades, as opposed to analytical propositions of North American conceptualism.

The readymade strategy is the key to understanding the cartoons of Priyanto. Because of his form and figure polarity, Mashadi has to put Priyanto in the category of figure, given the lack of conceptualism in his crude caricatures. But figure certainly does not have the same meanings in the Indonesian context. Firstly, Priyanto's drawings do not have the social realism agenda of his Filipino counterparts. It is the use of materials from the material reality of an uneven Indonesian modernization which distinguishes the art of GSRB from their conceptual brethren elsewhere. In this case, Priyanto was drawing his material from mass media and popular culture.

As I noted in the introduction, Harsono alludes to a similarity of his art work with Duchamp, linking his art strategy with dada. I also quoted Latin America Ramirez in her well regarded essay on Latin American conceptualism, arguing that the readymade was central to their strategies, in direct contrast to the Euro American version characterized by Lucy Lippitz's dematerialization of the object. Ramirez argues that the readymade was a means for art to intervene in everyday common life, allowing artist agency to intervene in circuits of uneven development and politics. While Indonesia shared many similarities with Latin America in their third

world status—dominance of development, neoliberal ideologues, an authoritarian state prone to violence, weak democratic movements led by students, extreme polarities of wealth, uneven and dependent economic relations with the North, there were several unique angles to the Indonesian development angle. Firstly, the level of education and urbanization was still low in the seventies, compared to Latin America. A high proportion of the population continued to be illiterate farmers. This suggests another motive for the readymade object which Yuliman later explicitly suggests in an essay in the eighties:

*“Art related to the economy and the poor living standards of the uneducated (seeing it within the context of modern education), poverty stricken segment of the populace. This art is integrally involve with modest technology, handmade, or locally produced equipment... this grassroots level art is traditional art. But the term traditional in this context has become confused because the sociocultural conditions defined as traditional are difficult to find in their entirety in Indonesia. The self-sufficient traditional segment of society, which in the past formed the mainstream element in Indonesian society, has now become marginal.”* (Supangkat, Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond 1997, 84)

Yuliman deliberately turns the idea of tradition on its head. He knows the traditional art academy fetishizes tradition for legitimation, a topic which we will explore in depth in Chapter four. He sees it as a meaningless and marginal term, instead he is arguing that using art objects from this sector, which is still large, may have communicative potential. This makes sense in the context of the charge of first tenet of the GSRB manifesto, the detachment of high or fine art from real life. The readymade opened communications with the poor and underdeveloped masses. Yuliman puts a development perspective on the art debate.

Seng picks up Yuliman's insight by linking Seni Kontekstual with the use of indigenous or "modest technology" products and material as readymades. But his concept of Seni Kontekstual is inaccurate for its insistence that it is a project for resistance. I will argue later in Chapter 3 that the Indonesian conceptualists wanted to analyze politics, but were secondary players to other traditions through the comparison between Harsono and Moelyono. But what do other art historians say about the politics of the seventies GSRB?

Supangkat has been typically elusive. He has communicated that GSRB disbanded in 1979 because of outside force, implying government pressure. (Maklai-Miklouho 1991, 77) Other student movements were crushed by surgical arrests in the same period.<sup>11</sup> But in a stunning admission in an essay for APT 3 in 1999 post the fall of the New Order, Supangkat was unambiguous:<sup>12</sup>

*Most of the works of the New Art Movement exhibited during the period of 1976-79 were installations. The works became political in the sense that they invited a reaction; and they created controversy, mainly because installations have been previously been unknown, and because the works showed a social concern that had previously been avoided. However, the New Art Movement did not have direct connections with politics. (Queensland Art Gallery 1999, 58)*

I disagree strongly. While Seni Konseptual was different from the kerakyatan art of the LEKRA, Supangkat overstates the case. We see this stance with the GSRB ideologues consistently over the next twenty years, restricting the conceptual critique to a critique against the academy. There is a banal type of academicism of the trendy form.

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<sup>11</sup> Maklai hypothesizes conflicts among the volatile personalities as the cause of the break up

<sup>12</sup> This confuses Maklai who has to elevate the poverty porn of Dede Eri Supria as the activist legacy of GSRB

The art works disproves it. *Paling Top* used readymades found in the totality of the Indonesian environment. It was cleverly conceptual and socially critical, in this case, exposing the underlying power behind the New Order regime, the army: paraphrasing Mao's old dictum of "power *flowing from the barrel of gun.*" While the message was simple, it was subversive in those days. While one can dismiss it as the beginning of the ongoing dispute between Supangkat and Harsono, it is harder to dismiss in the context of existence of PIPA.

## CHAPTER 2.2: The Politics of PIPA

There is a certain irony about GSRB history. Hardi and Supangkat's views get overplayed, mainly because of their dominant personalities. Besides Supangkat, Maklai also focuses in on the figure of the egotistical Hardi, who was active in the fledging international global art move, where he met Joseph Beuys, the great European conceptual artist in some seminar on art and nuclear disarmament in West Germany. But as Harsono rightly notes,

*"The tendency to dominate and the lack of equality during dialogue within the body of GSRB were beginning to be felt. The dominance of Jim Supangkat and Hardi was quite powerful. We did not want to be trapped in the power struggle within GSRB pulling us towards those poles of power."* (H. Wiyanto 2010, 91)

But as I will contend we can only see the political dimension of Seni Konseptual's aesthetic through the works of PIPA, which confirmed Harsono's instincts.

Indonesian art historian Danarto was on to something when he: *"considered Harsono's works 'successful poetry'... (and) Monument Revolusi by Bonyong Munni Ardhi as 'the most successful monument to the revolution constructed to date.'* (H. Wiyanto 2010, 76)

While Harsono has been rehabilitated from history, Bonyong and PIPA remain shadowy figures.<sup>13</sup> *Kelompok Kripribadian Apa* (What identity) was a group with some overlap with GSRB, whose had two very subversive shows in the same late

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<sup>13</sup> The direction to investigate PIPA was basis an informal comment from Ade Darmawan, the founder of successful urban collective Ruang Rupa. He agreed about his influence from his seventies, but saw it coming from the more radical PIPA, as opposed to the academic GSRB

seventies . PIPA consisted of Bonyong, Gendut Riyanto, Harris Purnama, Dede Eri Supria, Redha Sorana, Slamet Ryadhi, Ronald Manulagnm, Bambang Darto, and others, as well as Jack Body, an Australian musician. (p. 159)

The happenings at one of these shows at the Senisono Art Gallery oddly foreshadow the nineties.

*“On its third day, the scandalous 1977 exhibition was closed by the police who had for days guarded the exhibition and smelt its politicized (or pornographic) air. The police interrogated a number of participating artists. Three decades later, one of the visitors who had felt disturbed by the actions of these young artists can still recall a few of the porn magazines in one of the installations which took the form of a teenager’s bedroom. This was used as the excuse to shut down the exhibition. Some Pipa artist also conducted happenings in the hall by burning a mattress bound with iron chains, to bid symbolic farewell to laziness. (The chained mattress of course reminded Harsono of his work, Rantai yang Santai, the Relaxed Chain). The Pipa group exhibitions of 1977 and 1979 began to reveal, like GSRB, the use of new strategies and media in the form of installation works, multimedia, performance art, and forms of appropriation in painting. This initiative towards a more pluralist arts discourse seems to have been forgotten by the following generations due to the rarity of arts documentation.”* (H. Wiyanto 2010, 97-98)

The Indonesian Visual Art Archive offers sketchy documentation of what was shown in the 1977 (Marianto 2001)Senisono show. The most memorable was a piece called *Hotel Tower of Asia* by Bonyong. It consisted of a shanty and a beggar sitting next to a sign declaring that the future site of construction of a hotel called ASEAN tower, with international room rates. (see exhibit 4) It crossed the line into the explicitly political with a note which declared the kontraktor was CV Soerharto, a reference to the crony capitalism of the New Order where most foreign investors had to do “joint ventures” with the Suharto clan or their cronies. (see exhibit 5)

One of the few other accounts of this show was by art historian Dwi Marianto.

Suggesting Indonesian contemporary art began with this 1977 show, he writes:

*“Their works adopted a range of media and methods from the two dimensional to installations and three-dimensional objects. These are worth reviewing to provide a background for contemporary art in Yogyakarta in the 1990s... The works are marked by a blunt straightforwardness, employing little of the sort of euphemism that was so conspicuous until the fall of President Soerharto. Euphemism was as rampant in the mass media as it was in the statements of the government officials they so frequently quoted. A painting by Bambang Darto, for example, borrowed Marcel Duchamp’s idea of presenting a moustachioed version of the Mona Lisa, though in Darto’s case, it was Indonesia’s first lady Madame Tien Soerharto who was defaced. Harris Purnama was equally ironic with is painting of pale, starved looking infants juxtaposed with the logo for Susu Bandara, a famous brand of canned milk and dairy products.”*  
(Marianto 2001, 159)

This installation/readymade piece by Bonyong fires a critique at the uneven nature of the neoliberal trickle down of the New Order model of economic development.

Another piece by Bonyong is also very suggestive. It consisted of a cheap wooden table and a desk, the items appeared to be damaged, perhaps burnt and titled *“meja belajar” or study table*<sup>14</sup>. It suggested the sterile nature of the New Order education system, where conformity reigned: the art academy versus the sanggar.

Both Bonyong pieces, as well as the other PIPA pieces described by Marianto, establish the employment of the ready-made aesthetic in a context outside of Harsono. It also suggests that Seni konseptual’s practitioners had a more direct engagement with politics than Supangkat denies. Marianto evens goes so far to link their direct politics with the art of reformasi period, suggesting a genealogy between

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<sup>14</sup> this piece predates a very famous Heri Dono piece in the nineties called the *“Fermentation of Minds”*, although with less technical dexterity



PIPA and the AWAS show. How this political engagement evolves, we will see more in the follow chapter as we compare them versus the kerakyatan artist Moelyono.

# Chapter 3: The Desolate Eighties

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### CHAPTER 3.1: MOELYONO AND ACTIVIST ART

Sanento Yuliman coined the term *'desolateness'* to term the dominant art practices of the eighties. (Hujatnikajennong, *The Contemporary Turns: Indonesian Contemporary Art of the 80s* 2010, 4) GSRB had become a myth and disappeared from the mainstream. Indonesia was going through a period of fast economic growth post the second oil crisis in 1978. The new elites were buying paintings in a speculative frenzy.

My analysis of the counter practices of this period revolves around Harsono, whose story intertwines with Bonyong, and Moelyono. A student in ASRI in the late seventies, Moelyono also participated in the 1979 PIPA show. He came to fame in 1985 with his final year project KUD, an installation of an idealized New Order village.

*“Moelyono staged an artwork entitled KUD (Kesenian Unit Desa—Art in the Village Unit) parodying the government’s KUD (Koperasi Unit Desa—Village Unit Co-operatives) programme. His intention was to criticize local administrators, who paid more attention to the economy than to culture. In a badminton court (which also functioned as a parking area and a public thoroughfare), Moelyono laid out from north to south twenty two woven mats measuring 2 x 1. On each of the mats, which oriented east-west, was a traditional banana leaf plate containing a handful of soil with seeds of cassava, corn, and water spinach? Additionally, Moelyono set up a hut, topped by two kinds of roof tiles, some of which he had obtained from an original village unit co-operative. The board of examines rejected the work. (Sumartono 2001, 29)*

Not wanting to engage with conceptualism, the examiners declared KUD was not painting.<sup>15</sup> The painting hegemony reigned. Moelyono is an important figure in Indonesian art history. He became a face of the art and activism school in the international circuit. But more importantly, the genealogy of his resistance of the New Order allows us an understanding of the radical difference of conceptualist political engagement. Moelyono undermines Seng's linkage of conceptualism with resistance in Seni Kontekstual. Moelyono's was unusually articulate about his practice both in terms of writing, as well as documentation for his art work.<sup>16</sup> In KUD, Moelyono is also using the visual vocabulary of found objects in a rural environment.

Moelyono has a very strong ideological agenda. A follower of Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, who wrote the seminal *"Pedagogy of the Oppressed"* which was the handbook of much of the progressives under the liberation theology banner, Moelyono was concerned with the oppressed groups. Naturally, that puts him into art and politics tradition, later favoured by Queensland. But how does Moelyono define his art practice.

*"Moelyono describes in detail each stage of development, beginning with simple line drawing, to representation of surrounding life, which may include depiction of particular events that can be displayed in a public space ( and if of a 'problem' initiates dialogue). Collective dialogue begins when all members of the community can draw, with the arts worker assisting by sharpening the focus on the particular problems "by eliciting questions from members of the community". The community developed their own analysis and strategies in an intensive process of collective drawing and discussion. When all are convinced, they can draw, other materials are*

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<sup>15</sup> The North American conceptualists would have loved the tautological logic of the ASRI bureaucrats

<sup>16</sup> One caveat is that much of this was done in the nineties, but I feel it does capture Moelyono's intent and practice which are fairly consistent

*introduced such as wood cuts and local media (which included children's use of military uniforms on rattan figures in Brumbun. Exhibitions are held outside the community if the solution to the problem requires external involvement." (Hillyer 1997, 6)*

Like Friere, Moelyono focuses on dialogue, raising the consciousness of the oppressed, in his case through the medium of art. Besides emphasizing drawing as a practice, Moelyono employs everyday objects in his projects, be it the bamboo mats in KUD or the children's toy dolls. Like Bonyong and Harsono, he uses everyday objects to communicate the social reality. In 1995, he does a piece *Art Conscientization: Reflections of the Wonorejo Dam Project*, where he documents the consequences of the forced relocation of villagers because of a development project. (see exhibit 7) The installation's instructions are:

*1) Visual installation materials to give information.... 4. Statues made of straw represent farmers who will miss their profession as farmers. They are just object of development. ,,7. Human figures made of wires, pose as in dance performance of "Jaranan Butho". This is the people art which is wiped out by the dam project....9. The barrels are painted yellow, with a writing 'Industry' it represents industrial area for which the dam was built, as water supplier for Surabaya, the capital city of East Java. The heap of barrels pull the batik cloth show the industrialization threatens farmer's living, farm land ecosystem, villages ecosystem, and the existence of people's art community." (Moelyono 1996)*

Moelyono's art practice forces us to ask what was unique about GSRB once again. As discussed earlier, if the use of readymade objects dominated over analytical ideas in their installations, how did they differ from their countrymen with very different ideological agendas?

## CHAPTER 3.2: HARSONO AND PROSESS 85

After his disillusionments with Hardi and Supangkat, Harsono becomes a graphic designer in Jakarta. Partnering with PIPA members Gendut Malayan and Ronald Magulung, they form a progressive graphics art collective Gugus Grafis which worked with Teater Korma, a progressive theatre company. But Harsono remains socially committed, worried about the excesses of New Order development. Harsono articulates his aesthetic rationale for that period: basically defining social problems and trying to articulate them.

*“If in his works, Harsono pours his attention on society’s problems, he seems to care a lot about his presence among his community: caring enough to throw away all artistic illusions projected upon him. The ‘key’ word for Harsono thoughts in this matter is ‘problem’. A ‘problem’ doesn’t leave any mystery, it strips down all myths or dreams...The artist’s imagination is required not to create new symbols but to seek out appropriate (pre-existing) symbols that can be used again to spell out the problem. The materials to present the various problems among society has existed within the community itself, but the way of saying it, each time, requires continuously renewed objectivity.” (H. Wiyanto 2010, 93)*

Harsono also engages society’s silenced. But the terms of engagement are very different. Moelyono calls his art *‘conscientization’*, in line with the Frierean project focus on consciousness raising. I would argue that Moelyono is operating like the LEKRA artists: *‘turun bawa’* or going down to the masses, finding the answers to the social and epistemological problems directly from the oppressed through the mediation of art. Arbuckle criticizes Moelyono and Semsar Siahaan for focusing on the artist as the subject, as opposed to the masses. While this critique is harsh towards Moelyono who worked in poor, rural communities for decades; it is a valid critique of Harsono. At some level, Harsono has a more limited faith in his subject.

Instead, he has more faith in the process. His words about the methodology about

Proses 85:

*“ Proses 85 was an idea to try placing artworks as an expression of people’s problems, and at the time we chose the living environment. In the journey to seek out forms and environmental issues that we could raise, we found the process of information gathering, problem solving, and creative processes interesting and important to place as part of the creation of art. The word process also pointed that the creative activity is ongoing. Just like process is a kind of journey towards and end and that that the end point never arrives for an artist. Here, I place process as an inseparable part of creation.” (H. Wiyanto 2010, 101)*

Process 85 was an interesting transition event in Indonesian art history. A tentative attempt at collective art making, it reunited key GSRB and PIPA--Harsono, Bonyong, Riyanto, and Magalung--with the younger ones like Moelyono. It explored an industrial accident in a small village near Jakarta, where the inhabitants suffered mercury poisoning.<sup>17</sup> Besides commenting on the rampant pollution associated with New Order growth, the artists also wanted to address the rampant deforestation.

*“Harsono created his works out of recycled planks that would have been discarded to the waste dump. After painting it black and screen painting images of a verdant shady tree upon it, the planks were arranged to lean against gallery walls or strewn on the floor. Bonyong Munnir Ardhi brought in a giant tree trunk that had been uprooted and put it upon a pile of dirt that created an empty dirty field in the gallery. Gendut Riyanto amongst other things wrote a long poem with the title Bung Rampai untuk Ida (An anthology for Ida), an elegy for a child who died during his research about mercury pollution in the Jakarta Bay.” (Wiyanto, p. 101)*

In short, the aesthetics came out on the playbook of the PIPA shows. They searched for found objects to articulate a social reality. Again, unlike their conceptual installation brethren in Euro America, the focus was on the objects, particularly those of low technology.

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<sup>17</sup> similar to those seen in the Minimata tragedy in Japan in the fifties

So if both Moelyono and Harsono used readymades, what distinguished their aesthetic practices besides their relationship with the masses? I would argue that Moelyono's objects are almost secondary. There is very little over-engineering with respect of the objects. In *Woernojo Dam*, he deploys barrels, scarecrows, and batik as simple found objects. He does not aestheticize them. As noted by Hillyer, Moelyono draws as the prime aesthetic strategy, the objects were only a complement.

In contrast, the Seni Konseptualist like Harsono and PIPA do mediate their found objects. Look at *Tower of Asia*, Bonyong cleverly alters the signboard to suggest a narrative of crony capitalism. Harsono, with his graphic design genealogy, has a great aesthetic tendency than Bonyong, whose finishing was crude at best. In *Proses 85*, Harsono finds pieces of plank, paints them black and then silk-screens a painting of a verdant tree. In the nineties, he gets more sophisticated, using multiple silk screened images, *Voice/Sign* (see exhibit 8) or mass producing objects, *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers* (see exhibit 9)



### CHAPTER 3.3: PASARAYA DUNIA FANTASIA

In 1987, GSRB reforms and stages the Pasaraya Dunia Fantasia show. This first of a kind collective show had a mythic status for many. Ironically, it suffered even greater obscurity than the earlier seventies GSRB shows.<sup>18</sup> While the 1987, show had a dense catalogue it never got republished as a book in Indonesia, unlike the writings from the seventies.<sup>19</sup> Pasaraya Dunia Fantasia was the seminal art event of the sterile eighties. Besides the remnants of the old PIPA core around Harsono including Riyanto and Wiernadi; it marked the return of Jim Supangkat and a prominent role of the art historian Sanento Yuliman.<sup>20</sup>

The show was large and ambitious. Taking over the Taman Ismail Marjuki (TIM) Jakarta, the collective turned it into a department store. The first tenet of the seventies manifesto was back in full force: there is no distinction between high art and low art. The catalogue opens with a pin up of a dark, head woman, perhaps an Indonesian Olivia Newton John, clad in mirror sunglasses.(see exhibit 10) Clad in hipster jeans, an allusion to Ken Dedes, except the fly is closed this time, although the belt is unbuckled. No one ever said GSRB was politically correct.<sup>21</sup> The transparent shopping reveals the show's stars: Coca Cola, Marlboros, Pepsodent, and

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<sup>18</sup> GSRB published a book in bahasa consisting of various art work and essays about the seventies controversy. Gramedia published it widely in the eighties. Even out of print, numerous bootleg versions were available in Jogjakarta in the nineties.

<sup>19</sup> Only the proliferation of electronic media and the development of the Indonesian Visual Art Archive allowed the Pasaraya catalogue to be circulated via PDF. I commissioned the first English translation of the catalogue by Pitra Hutomo of IVAA.

<sup>20</sup> Former GSRB members Dede Es Supria, Priyanto and Siti Adayati rounded out the 12 artists who composed Projek 1.

<sup>21</sup> only one woman Adaytai made up their numbers

others branded products. An open banana is brandished, connecting consumer goods with mass desire.

The theme is visual art in everyday life. GSRB depicts a department store providing visual art products, as well as consumer goods. They are ambiguous where the line ends. These visual products include advertisements, magazine covers, stickers, pin ups, comics, and plastic accessories. (see Exhibit 11) Pasaraya does not literally mean department store, it means a street market, and this is a “*department store imitating street vendors*”. Because of the uneven modernization in Indonesia, the traditional informal sector, be it street vendors and pushcarts, co-existed with the stores of high consumer capitalism.

GSRB declare that it is a 4 Dimension installation. Besides the 2D elements (fabric panels and photographs), 3 D objects (objects with soft construction), they incorporates Time, the 4th Dimension, is achieved by walking through the hallway of the exhibition. (see Exhibit 12) What is the connection between the visual strategy and their ideology? Basically, they indict the Indonesian fine arts like painting. They deconstruct it as attempts to mimic Western liberal or bourgeoisie fine arts tradition, dating either from the Renaissance or the Enlightenment: a dubious legitimation.

*“The definition of visual art has been trapped. It has become very poor and specific regarding the notion of ‘high art.’ The delineation refuses to see existing visual art expression with other notions in its surrounding reality. Such biased and distracted definition has been practiced through the history of Indonesian art. Meanwhile, arts descended from ethnic cultures, popular art in a daily basis, crafts and designs... remains unacknowledged. Such discrepancy is ironic”*

As outsiders to the continued hegemony of the painting elites, Yuliman and Supangkat indict its elitism.<sup>22</sup> Besides the pleas for pluralism, GSRB hit upon a more interesting point. For all their posturing and bombast, now fuelled by a speculative art market, Indonesian modern art is bankrupt:

*“Conception of visual art in Indonesia heads toward a collapse. Indonesian Modern art...has been experiencing considerable stagnation. It has put an end in exploration to practice early Modern Art styles. It has shown inability to find foundation for further development. Other notions of art are extinguished in its own environment. It has been neglected over such distracted definition. Visual art products inspired by ethnic cultures are considered products from the past, designs are considered crude art exposing merely superficial beauty whereas popular art in a daily basis is considered mass cultural products conceiving poor value.”*

They hit it on the nail. Painting in Indonesia is at a sterile dead-end, irrespective of how much clever technical innovations, be it the abstract modernisms from ITB or the surrealistic extravagances out of Jogja. It cannot deal with material reality of a modernizing Indonesia. It only rests upon an alienated Western art history. What is the solution? Artists must infuse low art to revitalize a sterile tradition. Yet there are silences in the manifesto. While accusing modern art for repressing craft and mass culture, Supangkat and Yuliman are quiet about the entire kerakyatan tradition of LEKRA.<sup>23</sup> Neither is there an acknowledgement about the agency of non-art

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<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, when the Indonesian contemporary met the global postmodern via the exhibition circuit in the nineties, Supangkat found ideological and institution support for this anti-elitism.

<sup>23</sup> possibly expedient given the continued red scare

professionals, for example the masses, in revitalizing art, as exemplified by the conscientization projects of Moelyono<sup>24</sup>,

As we have been arguing in the last two chapters, the practitioners of the new art in Indonesia were already developed a home-grown conceptual strategy which advanced beyond the polemic between high and low art. Taking the readymade focus of Seng's Seni Kontekstual, how does it change in Pasaraya Dunia?

The practitioners have a sophisticated answer. They use Harsono's problem solving methods and data collection and design processes, as articulated around Process 85. In Seng's terminology, these are the local art objects from local materials, although there is a twist: many of these were mainly visual objects, without a 3D. But a similar desire to modify these objects is articulated.

*"Mass production of goods are visually striking in this era of market and economy proliferation. The goods continuously display expressions of form, colour, and style. Such forms and expressions have become the centre of our interest...Soon came the first difficulty. The effort needed to track down forms and images from mass produced goods is not simple. Since creative process is no longer considered derived from a process known as relegation thus making it seem magical; since forms and images we find everyday act as street guru. It is immediately apparent that technical devices are required. Usage of such devices were divided into three stages. In the beginning, a list constituted an inventory of products which are presenting forms we see on the streets, find in markets, in school, placed in newspapers or magazines or advertisements. Next stage involved collecting and selecting objects to be modified. During this stage, visual elements were highly considered. Then finally the study gathered a selection of stickers, t shirts, advertisements, comics or graffiti to be modified and reproduced both as visual artworks and design."*

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<sup>24</sup> Moelyono was actively giving seminars on art and consciousness raising at this time. Given the smallness of the Indonesian art scene, it was probably a deliberate omission rather than ignorance

The GSRB practitioners are taking the low art angle one step further than the GSRB ideologues. They are insisting that pluralism of low art is not sufficient, these art works need to be transformed, both materially and through a process of research.

(see exhibit 13)

*“Advertisements for products found both in Jakarta supermarkets and warungs (small local stalls selling snacks, drinks, and some household items) everywhere,, such as Rinso, Lux, Mortein, or Camay appeared the same until closer inspected revealed slight changes in text. Some examples: “BLUX ruins my skin so softly’, was accompanied by a picture of a beautiful girl eating soap. “SOMAY’s touch gently rapes. MORPHINE murders all the neighbors.” (Maklai-Miklouho 1991, 104)*

The same strategy of aesthesizing found objects gets transferred to modifying mass culture. The interpretation of Pasaraya Dunia has been mixed at best. Seng notes the anti-elitist language of the manifesto. The imperious, now alienated from GSRB, Hardi captures the contradictions best when he declared: *“Ratu Plaza is better. While they denounce elitism, they exhibit in an elite space.”* The GSRB ideologues have made a devil’s pact with consumer capitalism in their war with the tired painting elites. Is a self-aware research process, along with social consciousness, enough to create distance from a capitalism aligned with the New Order? These newer forms of found objects or readymades had a strange seductive quality to them, almost like the banana in the model’s hand. Unlike the ugliness—be it the mercury poisoning or the shanties—of the New Order, these consumer images were ambiguous. There was a spell, which mocked the repeated attempts at process discipline.

Ironically, Arief Budiman, the sociologist involved in GSRB, offers a bizarre solution at a conference post the show:

*“Identifying the Seni rupa baru’s alternative to universalist aesthetics as contextual aesthetics, he explained that aesthetic experience was related to a common human experience in a certain group of people, either a nation, ethnic group, social class, village group, or city.” (Maklai-Miklouho 1991, 105)*

In a sense, he brings the argument back to Moelyono and kerakyatan. Perhaps a type of collective class consciousness was the solution to dealing with the problematic aesthetics of capitalism. At some strange level, Pasaraya Dunia was probably the least schizophrenic of the GSRB shows. In this case, the GSRB ideologues were right, they were very little political content. An aesthetics focused on process was being short-circuited by the ubiquitous enemy of mass culture. As we will see in Chapter 5, this time the enemy was held at bay by the conceptual strategies, but it was going to run rampant over the artists during reformasi in the nineties.

# Chapter 4: The Street

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## CHAPTER 4.1: THE JOGJA BINAL

The story of GSRB in the eighties ends with a whimper. Again, the personalities imploded. Supangkat goes on to Project 2, where GSRB, without Harsono, builds a massive installation about AIDS and ships it to Perth for ARX.<sup>25</sup> ARX heralded the beginnings of the global exhibition circuit, which fuelled the growth of Indonesian contemporary art, of both the Konceptual and other versions. The story of Indonesian art and the global biennale circuit is well known. The various publications and catalogues associated with the Queensland Gallery's Asia Pacific Triennial and the Fukuoka Museum's Triennial tells the story. The usual characters of Supangkat, Heri Dono, Nindityo, and Arahmiani dominate this story. But the true story of Indonesian art in the nineties was happening at home, not at the circuit. A new generation of artists, those educated in the nineties, were emerging. Their links with the GSRB conceptualism were indirect, but they were employing its strategies in new bold ways.

The story begins in the early nineties. The government crackdown on the universities in the seventies did not end the problem of student resistance against the New Order. Many of the leaders just blended into university campuses. These leaders started forming sanggars or informal centres of learning, teaching social and political theory to the younger generation of students. (Aspinall 2005) (Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatal Belonging* 2006) Harsono's first curator Enin Supriyanto was involved in one of these sanggars in Bandung and the

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<sup>25</sup> The heavy work was never shipped back to Indonesia due to high freight costs. The truncated GSRB then disappears into history



nineties artist Agung Kurniawan was involved in one called KSB, Kilo Sierra Bravo at the Universitas Gaja Madah, UGM, an elite social sciences university in Jogja. A diverse range of political and social theorist were studied, including Paulo Friere, the Frankfurt School, post-structuralism, and even Marxism, despite constant persecution by the New Order who continued to employ a red scare ideology

In 1988, there was a second wave of student agitation. These actions took place across the country across many universities. ITB students stormed official offices in Bandung. In Jogja, there was a notorious show trial of three UGM students who were caught with 'seditious' literature. Stressing again the power of the red terror ideology in the legitimation of the New Order regime, the students were sentenced to harsh prison terms. Amidst this charged political situation, the nineties generations artists first emerged. In 1992, in Jogja, a ragtag coalition began organizing an event called the Binal. This coalition consisted of students from UGM, led by Agung's KSB group mentioned earlier; art students from ASRI, and older artists, notably Dadang Christanto, as well as Edy Hara and Heri Dono.<sup>26</sup>

Agung Kurniawan was one of the main organizers of the event. Working under the tutelage of Dadang Christanto who was the public face of the event, Agung oversaw the staging of multiple events spread over several locales in Jogja over a month. This was an unprecedented grassroots event involving a broad coalition of student and

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<sup>26</sup> My knowledge of this event has been facilitated by a retrospective show about the Binal organized by IVAA in 2009, which included extensive interviews with key players, conducted by researcher Grace Samboh.

community groups. It did not involve art professionals. Agung describe KBS as a student group interested in the arts in the context of social change, but none of them were artists. Agung later went to ASRI for his technical art training. The Indonesian avant garde was minimally involved with the exception of Christanto whose claim to fame was limited at that stage. Harsono and Supangkat later participated as spectators and wrote magazine articles.

The public staging of the Binal was extremely ambitious. In the seventies, even the radical PIPA and GSRB shows took place in TIM Jakarta or Galerie Senisono in Jogja. . The Binal totally exploded the traditional idea of an arts space The Binal would take place across multiple sites, including the alun alun, the public space outside the Jogja palace or kraton; the train station; the main boulevard of UGM; and the train station. Several events also took place in the homes of various artists, one of the first instances of the blurring between private and public spaces for art.

However, the Galerie Senisono was still the anchor behind the events. Senisono was under threat. There were plans for a new palace for Suharto at Senisono and the closure of the existing arts space. The students were very aware of this development and the Binal was a conscious attempt to resist this spatial hegemony, a concept which I will develop later. Returning to the private homes, the most famous home hosted the most infamous piece of the show, Weye Haryanto's *Terror Products*. Haryanto takes the readymade found object into unchartered territory, transforms the readymade installation in public space. He takes cigarette boxes, shades of the Marlboros from Pasaraya Dunia catalogue cover, and covers his house. (see exhibit

14) This installation captured the ambiguity of the neo liberal development of the country to date: development at some very terrible cost. The title was pretty blatant about this ambiguity.

Interpreting terror products in the terms of Seni Konseptual, Haryanto uses readymade, local or low art type projects for communication. But what distinguishes this art work from its earlier precedents from PIPA is its sheer size. Haryanto basically covers his entire house with the cigarette boxes. The object's engagement with politics and real life has changed drastically, instead of merely commenting, the art directly engages with life. The art work escapes the confines of the gallery. It engages the public through the lived experience of the street. Not only does the public engage the artwork, the artwork engages the institutions of state power through the permitting process.

The IVAA 2009 retrospective had some surprising revelations. Many had assumed the spontaneity and the youth of the organizers meant it was an improvisational event. On the contrary, it was highly organized. For example, Terror Products was not a spontaneous performance piece. Modifying a housing structure required ten plus stamps from the local authorities. KBS, operating under the legitimacy of UGM, obtained these various local approvals. The original copy of the application replete with the stamps, in possession of Haryanto, was finally archived for the 2009 retrospective.

Samboh also uncovered very complex linkages between the staging of the event and the various political and social forces shaping a changing Indonesian landscape. As

she stresses, an event of such public scope does not operate in a vacuum and without the cooperation of these very real organs of power, formal or informal. While it is well known that Christanto was the intellectual mastermind of the project, little was known on how tenuous his hold on the coalition was. Samboh discovered that he was under a very real threat of physical violence, as his imperious style was creating discord. It was only the intervention of local community leader Brotoseno which prevented this.<sup>27</sup> In his research on the *reformasi* protests which ended the New Order in 1998, Indonesian sociologist JA Denny described the central role of “*political entrepreneurs*”, local leaders who mobilized social networks for change. The alliance between these entrepreneurs and the student movements drove the massive student protests which ended the New Order. (Denny 2006) This analytical framework certainly describes the role of Brotoseno in the Binal.

The students of UGM provided the political legitimacy, but it was also the community/social groups which provided the power to implement the event. The strong organization of the event survived the pullout of the ASRI students early in the event, who felt slighted by the KBS people.

The introduction to the short Binal catalogue contains very direct and sophisticated social theory. The Binal critiqued the hegemony of the New Order regime, very explicitly spelt out and named. There is very little prevarication commonly seen in Indonesian contemporary art, where New Order references get encoded in some obscure Javanese folkloric context. The term hegemony, originates from the Italian

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<sup>27</sup> Samboh describes the pivotal role of Brotoseno, continues to be active in Jogja local politics today as the head of Search and Rescue, as the most important discovery of the 2009 research.

Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Going beyond the crude privileging of material reality over the superstructure or economics over ideas, which dominated much of Marxist social theory, Gramsci argued that capitalist domination also operates through ideas and culture. The ruling class creates a hegemonic culture dominating the oppressed.

The Binal manifesto also talked about structuralism, alluding to Claude Levy Strauss through the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Breaking away from structural functionalism dominating the discipline of anthropology, Geertz suggested the primacy of meaning and culture in society, as opposed to impersonal social forces.

Both Gramsci and Geertz basically argued that power does not exist in some material vacuum, whether through control of violence or economics, but has to be articulated through cultural forms and ideas. Both argued against the crude materialism dominating the positivist social science.

Geertz had particular relevance to Indonesia. As well as his later theoretical work, he had spent most of his ethnographic career on the ground in Indonesia. He wrote on how performance and cultural practices construct social and power structures the Indonesian context. (C. Geertz 1980) Pemberton has argued that the idea of Java was critical to the New Order regime. He examines rituals related to the Kraton, festivals, election rituals, and theme parks. (Pemberton 1994)

In short, the Binal organizers went beyond the scattershot, muckraking attempts of earlier activist art. Instead, they were addressing the legitimacy structure of the New Order regime. The Binal organizers employed street art to this end. By taking their works into the street, they displaced the usual New Order ideological nodes of

power. If the celebration of traditional art through orchestrated festivals reinforced New Order hegemony, the Binal offered a counter narrative: street centric ceremonies subverting these hegemonic assumptions. While the Binal catalogue does not employ the same terminology as I use, it alludes in this direction. Firstly, it explicitly links New Order hegemony with sites of traditional cultural performance, namely Baliho in Jogja. Interestingly, it also mentions Mini Indonesia theme park, which forms a critical chapter to Pemberton's analysis. Created from the massive appropriation of land, this theme park, constructed by Suharto's wife Tien, celebrated the idea of a beautiful Indonesia through the legitimation of cultural performance. The Binal catalogue alludes to the power of tourism or foreign legitimacy in the construction of this hegemony, which also bizarrely alludes back to one of the foundation pieces of Indonesian conceptualism, the *Tower of Asia* by Bonyong.<sup>28</sup> To recap, the *Tower of Asia* deconstructs the myth of the forward march of Indonesian development by inserting a beggar and a shanty into a sign celebrating the constructing of a massive construction commemorating Indonesia hosting an ASEAN meeting.

The conceptual critique of New Order hegemony informs my reading of Heri Dono's performance piece *Kuda Binal* or *Wild Horses*. Distinguished for his massive installations which blend the use of readymades with traditional Javanese iconography, Dono, the most famous of the eighties generation, was in the early phases of his career.

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<sup>28</sup> The cycle goes back to Black December. The seventies student movements started with protests against mini Indonesia. Conceptualism and radical politics have an interesting parallel history

Kuda Binal consisted of traditional horse figures. They dance around the alun alun or the public space in front of the kraton. (see Exhibit 15) The choice of the performance site is extremely critical. As Pemberton has argued, one of the critical tropes New Order legitimacy was the continuity with central Javanese sultanates. These sultanates, particularly those of Jogja and Solo, symbolically manifested their power through the physical presence of kratons or the palaces. The urban and psychological geography of central Java revolved around the kraton. Pemberton argues that the fires at the Solo Kraton in the 1985 coincided to one of the most serious early challenges to the New Order regime, suggesting a divine unease with the power structure.<sup>29</sup>

Contemporary art intrudes into these sanctums of New Order hegemony in the form of Kuda Binal. In the terms of conceptualism, they were materializing the contexts of power. What exactly was at stake? First and foremost, Kuda Binal was a traditional dance. As the catalogue have stated, traditional dances underpin the nexus of traditional and legitimacy. Or as Pemberton observes, dances have a traditional legitimacy, as they derive from folk culture. Furthermore, they are a cultural form with appeal to foreign audiences who are attracted by the exoticism of the work. Before 1992, Dono's work had little performance components, consisting mainly painting cartoonish figures with Javanese allusions. Kuda Binal ruptures all this in subverting the traditional dance.

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<sup>29</sup> The closest parallel to the conjunction of physical and symbolic space is the importance of Tiananmen Square in the Chinese political order. Even the supposedly rational communist political recognizes this geography of power as seen in the bloodshed of 1988.

Dono creates a very explicit connection between tradition and power. The incongruity of the dance lies in the dancing figures. While they are nominally horses, a common trope in Javanese folk dance, they are anthromorphic hybrids. (see exhibit 16) They are men pretending to be horses. These men border on the threatening: some wear gas masks suggesting modern, depersonalized violence like World War One. The dance states the great unsaid of Indonesian history, the New Order was built on the murders of 1965, which are estimated up to 1 million people and the imprisonment of 2 million.<sup>30</sup>

The Kuda Binal dancers engage in very powerful movements leading to extreme frenzy or amok. There is very little of ritualized grace. They look like they are in a trance. Indonesian political discourse juxtaposes extreme social courtesy against a breakout of amok or frenzy.<sup>31</sup> Political violence is described as running amok. In explicitly contextualizing the fear and paranoia underlying the system, the dance again forces the ideological question. Very few foreign art critics have really grasped the significance of the dance given limited knowledge of the role of tradition as hegemony and the specifics of Indonesian history. They describe it as a hybrid of tradition and modernity, with all the exoticism that it implies.

The IVAA retrospective also uncovered some lost video of Kuda Binal, which ironically ended up in the offices of the GRAMEDIA publishing conglomerate in Bali.

The video captures the sheer spectacle of the event. We see a crowd of thousands,

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<sup>30</sup> The numbers are disputed. Low numbers of the dead, by the army, range to half a million and the great Indonesian political scientist Benedict Anderson puts at a million. Nonetheless, between the murdered and the jailed, this is one of the big unspoken genocides of world history by any means.

<sup>31</sup> Nidityo's work on introversion in his performances speaks to this issue



estimated at eight thousand, in the Alun Alun. The gas masked bedecked dancers charge into the sanctum of political politeness and legitimacy. The old cliché of raw energy doesn't do justice to the proceeding.

The Binal was an unusual eruption in Indonesian art history. It was universally hailed as a success with attendance estimated at over ten thousand. No art event ever pulled such numbers over such a period. It pulled art out from the safe institutional confines of the galleries, leaving a powerful impression among nineties generations artists. While not involved due to his wife's pregnancy, Nindityo describes his sense of awe of the event and his regret in his limited participation. The young S Teddy describes the sense of exhilaration about the power of art unleashed on the streets and his contempt about the older institutional forms. While hard to quantify, the 92 Binal demonstrated the power of Indonesian Seni Konseptual in its new more public evolution both to a larger public and a newer generation of artists.

There is a final irony to the 1992 Binal. It marked the ascendance and subsequent irrelevance of the eighties generation artists. They were discovered by the foreign curators visiting the lengthy Binal. Dono replicates Kuda Binal in Darwin, gets the Oxford residency with David Elliot and becomes the most displayed Indonesian in the international circuit. Eddy Hara ends up in Berne. Christanto ends up in APT I and becomes a stalwart of the entire art and activism theme, trumpeted by Queensland. Ironically, the most activist of the generation, Christanto and Siahaan end up living aboard as exiles. The push for arts and politics has to be taken up by another

generation: the nineties artists, whose ranks were defined by the Cemeti shows of the second half of the nineties,

What was the connection between GSRB and the Binal? Harsono and Supangkat were mere spectators. Christanto could be seen as the intermediating figure, having participated both in Pasaraya and the Binal. But I would suggest the linkages have to be seen in the context of the evolving conceptual strategy. If GSRB argued that the use of found or local objects captures Indonesian reality, the 92 Binal takes this critique into the realm of politics via the critique of culture and ideology. While there were always performativity elements in the early work, like the PIPA happenings at Senisono, the Binal pushes this performativity dimension into public space. The Binal also pushes the strategy of resistance beyond mere observation and understanding into one of direct confrontation: art argues with ideology. Art deconstructs ideology.

On a concrete level, the Binal brings Harsono back to Jogja. After almost a decade of relative obscurity, Harsono unleashes his practice with extreme energy. Unlike his eighties peers, he did not vanish for the international circuit, although he participated in some critical shows. His participation in the Cemeti shows linked the GSRB aesthetic agenda with the nineties generation. As Nindityo recalls, the return of Harsono to Jogja was a big event.

## CHAPTER 4.2: THE JAKARTA NINTH

If the Binal left most everyone with warm feelings, the same cannot be said about the Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup> Biennale. While it had very little of the shock value associated with the seventies GSRB and PIPA shows, it alienated many of its logical sympathizers, be it the artists and the other Indonesian intellectuals. Despite the apparent triumph in the academic, institutional scene, Indonesian conceptualism was still torn by the disagreement between the ideologues and the practitioners on the role of politics, explaining much of the bitterness behind the 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

As noted earlier, the eighties were dominated by painting despite conceptualism's advances. But in 1993, the Jakarta Art Council commissioned Jim Supangkat to be the curator of the 9th Jakarta Biennale. Conceptual art finally gets a platform in the most prestigious stage for the Indonesian fine arts. Supangkat did not pass up his opportunity. Breaking away from painting, he shows very radical work by Indonesian standards, including video art, installations, and performances. His show was anchored by mainly eighties educated artists who were finding emerging fame in the growing, international exhibition circuit: Heri Dono, Eddy Hara, Nindityo, the Javanese female performance artist Arahmaiani, Dadang Christanto, the Balinese video artist Krisna Murti, and Semsar Siahaan.

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<sup>32</sup> Researching the Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup> has been problematic. The catalogue is missing from IVAA, none of it has been translated, and Supangkat has been silent about the controversy in his English writings. I base many of my facts upon the work of art historian Agung Hujanikajenong, who wrote his ITB thesis on the issue. His latest thoughts are articulated in an essay for the yet unpublished 2011 catalogue for the Singapore Art Museum's Negotiating Home and Nation show.

Supangkat calls this show *'the emergence of eighties art'*, which is slightly confusing, given that eighties art in Indonesia was painting dominated and these artists were marginal at best. As Nindityo recounts, the venue of eighties art was in his small residence, doubling as Cemeti. The label eighties generation artists is more appropriate, artists educated at Indonesian art academies in the eighties after the agitations of GSRB.

But Supangkat had a more radical idea than a mere history of styles. Using the theories of postmodernist Charles Jencks, he tied the eighties generation with the post avant garde. He also traced the beginning of this post avant garde to the efforts of GSRB in the seventies. This connection is critical at many levels. Firstly, it links GSRB explicitly with contemporary Indonesian art as we know it. Secondly, it opens a door for Supangkat to connect Indonesian conceptualism with postmodernism. Thirdly, it allows us to reframe the question of the avant garde in conceptualist, versus postmodern terms.

Jencks goes beyond the tired tautology of post –modern art as contemporary art. He also distinguishes postmodern art from the postmodern theory. Instead, he does an art history analysis, suggesting that the origins of post modern art lie with the radical avant garde of the 1920s, namely Dada and the Surrealists. He links postmodern art with these earlier revolts against modernism.

Jenck's move opens the door for Supangkat. Firstly, the problem with artistic postmodernism in Indonesia is that none of the artists were particularly conversant in postmodernism. As Harsono notes in his interview, it was only in the late nineties

that they attended seminars explicitly dealing with the issue. Even more pronounced than most other theories, the definition of postmodern is particularly vague, ranging from the post structuralism of the French, the later post colonialism of Homi Bhaba, and a wide variety of oppositional politics, including feminism, environmental, and race. Jenck's connection of postmodern art with the artistic practices of the radical European avant garde solves this definitional Gordian knot. Since GSRB practices had a Dadaist component to them, ergo, Supangkat can define them as postmodern. The rest becomes genealogy: the eighties artist were the successors of GSRB, therefore they practice a form of postmodern art.

Supangkat then identifies the art practices which connect Dada with GSRB, mainly the use of the readymade objects, as well as the use of non painting oriented practices, be it installation or performance. As the earlier part of this paper illustrates, Supangkat was only being descriptive given what practitioners were doing. Earlier attempts to name this evolution have been tentative and mainly phrased in the critique against elitist art forms, namely painting. Now Supangkat names it as a type of conceptualism, although he then connects it with postmodernism.

Jenong<sup>33</sup> accurately identifies the rationale for this historical exegesis. It allows Supangkat to bypass the problem of modernism. By revolting against modernism, GSRB bypasses the Euro American modernism. If we buy the theory of a Euro American modernism driven by French or American avant grades, we have to assume that modern Indonesian painting practices are derivative at best. It goes

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<sup>33</sup> I will use Hujanikajenong's shortened family name Jenong from now on, for simplicity

back to Oesman Effendy's charge that there is no Indonesian painting; basically it is all derivative from the West. Later in 1996, Supangkat uses a different device to escape this dilemma, the concept of multi-modernisms. Indonesian modernism cannot be understood in the terms of the dilemma of Western modernism if we assume all modernisms are a response to modernizations.

Ironically, the Jakarta 9th was not the triumphal coronation of these conceptual or postmodern practices. Besides the usual reactionary tirades by the painting elites about the technical quality of the work,<sup>34</sup> Supangkat's efforts were savagely attacked by the conceptual practitioners themselves. Jenong recounts the tone of these attacks. Firstly, the academic critics savaged Supangkat for playing hard and fast with the term postmodern. They noted misspellings in the essay of some of the names of the Western intellectuals associated with postmodernism. They also noted that Supangkat associate the Frankfurt school with the Post Structuralists. I would characterize these critiques as theological at best and pedantic at worst.

More relevantly, the artists were outraged, most notably Semsar and Harsono.

Among the artworks, Semsar's piece attracted the most attention. He took over the basement of the Taman Ismail and turned it into an installation piece resembling a graveyard, some reference to the downside of the New Order. But Semsar had a twist to the piece: he attached a sign describing the basement as a "*postmodern free*

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<sup>34</sup> The power of the reactionaries was durable. The subsequent two Jakarta biennales saw a return to painting with a vengeance, complete with Dede Es Supria poverty porn of street children. I see the vehemance of Supangkat's postmodern pluralism in the context of this stubborn, absurd system: seeing the debate as oedipal. Like Frankenstein, Indonesian lyrical painting never seem to die for three decades.

zone.” Unfortunately, the early death of Semsar has prevented further direct research about the context of his argument. But most of the artists interviewed, including Teddy, Nindityo, and Harsono, remember the work well. In his interpretation, Harsono feels that Semsar was one of the few artists who actually read the curatorial statements and was feeling aggrieved by the extreme focus on aesthetics. For Harsono, who wrote a scathing piece in Kompas, Jim Supangkat was guilty of the sins of modernism. Modernism assumes some grand narrative. Harsono sees postmodern curators, perhaps alluding to the curator auteurs of the circuit, as guilty of their own grand narrative.

Once again, the conceptual practitioners were more aware of direct political context than the GSRB ideologues, as we have seen before. Shortly, Harsono had his first solo show in Indonesia. Selling his car to fund the project, Harsono’s show *Suara* was held at Gedung Gallery in July 1994, with the former student activist, now advertising executive, Enin Supriyanto as the main curator. Enin was very conscious of the legacy of the ninth, taking pains to stress the contrasts:

*“The curators (Jakarta IX) busied themselves with justifying the tremendous development in contemporary art within the atmosphere of postmodernism. The variations and the network of themes condensed into works by the artists were not considered in relation to the matters of postmodernism. What seemed important was that the works presents by the participants in the Biennial as strongly as possible step outside the mainstream of modernism with its strict compartmentalization, while in fact that there is a large stream of thematic issues existing within our art circles went unacknowledged.”* (Harsono 1994)

*Suara* showcased some of Harsono’s strongest works to date, several of which were earlier exhibited in Australia, either in ARX or APT. Like Pasaraya Dunia, there was an emphasis on the fourth dimension, in this case space, as opposed to time; although

one could argue that they were realistically the same thing. Harsono again uses readymades, graphic design prints; but characterizes his evolution in the use of utilizing space to communicate to his audience. The greatest legacy of the show was the previously un-shown *Voice without a Voice/Sign*, which later makes it to Apinan's *Tensions and Tradition's Show*. It consisted of a set of silk screened photographs of human hands spelling out the word DEMOKRASI; some of the hands are bound by rope. As with many of Harsono's works, the message is pretty explicit: democracy is a prisoner under the New Order. The practitioners want a radical conceptual art, not one that just amounted to aesthetic radicalism in the use of mediums. But while addressing the same issues, the Masrinah murder, East Timor, plaguing New Order society, the radicalism took a very conceptual form. Harsono remains caught up in the purity of the artistic process, in this case using space to purify his communication with the audience. He continues to shun direct engagement with the masses and the oppressed.

Ironically, despite falling into obscurity, Bonyong shows shortly later in 1995.

*Instalasi Buruh Tani* at the Bentara Budaya in Jogja is an interesting hybrid. Like Harsono, he transitions from his legacy of readymades to an idea of installation. The IVAA documentation quotes him as saying: *"An installation art that represents a concrete object will be more potential to develop intense communication with the audiences."*

Again, we see the conceptual focus on the readymade object as the medium for articulating social issues. Breaking new thematic ground, *Buruh Tani* dealt with the



exploited rural workforce, breaking from the urbanism of PIPA. He incorporates new techniques in this piece, including simple black and white or “*stereotypical*” drawings of the lives of these rural proletariats. He also uses a technique called negebek or tracing where he tries to capture the essence of the object. Ironically, the *Buruh Tani* show seems to be a step backward for Bonyong. His black and white drawings seem more representative of wood cuts, harkening almost back to LEKRA and kerakyatan. (see exhibit 18). Juxtaposing the art work of Bonyong with a woodprint from the LEKRA influenced *Taring Padi* of the late nineties; one would be very hard pressed to tell the difference. While his catalogue talks about GSRB, installation art, and postmodernism, obviously very aware of the entire Jakarta Ninth, Bonyong seems to have taken an aesthetic step backwards. The split between the GSRB ideologues and the practitioners seem artificially heightened, as the practitioners began to be increasingly literal about their political concerns.

The first half of the nineties saw the breakout of Indonesian conceptualism into Indonesian society. No longer confined to fringe galleries, the art took to the street in the form of the *Jogja Binal 92*. Conceptualism had a power to directly engage audiences, which amateurs of the *Binal* unexpectedly discovered. It took to new spaces like the streets and the sanctums of state power. While the *Binal* heralded the power of the form, the *Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup>* hinted at some internal contradictions.

Despite its temporary domestic triumph, the GSRB ideologues of conceptualism, namely *Supangkat*, were finding internal discontents. Conceptual practitioners were uneasy about a more hollow type of conceptualism, more similar to North American

varieties, which allied itself with global postmodernism. The turn towards aesthetic conceptualism alienated conceptual practitioners who were struggling with strategies dealing with art and life. Of the two great conceptual pioneers, Harsono continues to argue for a balance between an imperial type of politics and the purity of conceptual forms through the use of the readymade. In contrast, Bonyong seem to finding solace in the earlier traditions of Kerakyatan, finding his grounding in a type of class consciousness and an aesthetic which has been well trod by Moelyono in the eighties. The legacy of the Seni conceptualists remains to be played out in the second half of the nineties, when a generation of younger activist artists, well versed in the tenets of conceptualism, take down the New Order regime, as we will see in Chapter 5.

# Chapter 5: Hollow Victory

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## CHAPTER 5.1: SLOT INT THE BOX

The young S Teddy was typical of many of the nineties generations. In our interviews, he details a diasporic education. He started in Solo, studied painting, was quickly bored, and ended up practicing conceptual installation and sculpture in Jogja. Teddy met Bonyong who was teaching wayang puppetry at Solo. For Teddy, the streets were his real teacher. He befriends activists, participates in sanggars, and apprentices with the artists associated with in the emerging, alternative gallery Cemeti.

While his peers discovered GSRB through the bootleg Gramedia book, Teddy heard the stories first hand from Bonyong. His aesthetic focuses on objects and readymades, awed by their almost mystical communicative quality, particularly in contexts outside formal institutions, be it the art school or the gallery system. He encounters Haryanto's Terror Products in the Jogja Binal, describing it as spectacular and monumental in its message.

Agung Kurniawan differed from Teddy in many ways. Personality-wise, he was intensely intellectual, ruthlessly practical and eschewed the Bohemianism of the art student crowd. Yet he is characterized by the same diasporic intellectualism. Dropping out as an archaeology student at the prestigious Gajah Madah University, he ends up in ISI studying graphic design. His graphic design training propels him to success in the art world, earning a spot in the Jakarta Ninth at a very young age and later the sobriquet the best drawer in Indonesia. He was later known for his very powerful black and white drawings, honed by the

graphic design discipline of line drawing; but Agung also made installations, a trait seen in many nineties artists.

Like Teddy, Agung saw the fount of most of his learning taking place outside the institution, in his case of the KBS sanggar of UGM. Nuriani describes Agung's educational journey as learning under the banyan tree, a very eloquent and romantic image connecting him with the traditional of the sanggars stretching back to the Indonesian revolution (Juliastuti 2009). His introduction to contemporary art was through the practice of street organizing, in this case the legendary Jogja Binal.

Both of these artist identify themselves with the nineties generation, literally artist whose formal training were in the nineties, influenced by the heightened social activism of the period, as well as an acceptance of the tenets of conceptualism. Unlike the eighties generation artists like Heri Dono and Edie Hara, the nineties generation saw very little need to engage with the canvas. While the painting hegemony still remained, ASRI art students would not study mixed media installations until their third year in an education still heavy on realistic drawing or painting. This nineties generation saw conceptual art as the means for communicating. Besides the impact of informal learning, both Agung and Teddy, as well as others, speak to the formative experience of the mass spectacles of conceptual art in Indonesia: the 9<sup>th</sup> and the Jogja Binal.

The nineties generation criticized their conceptual forefathers, in this case the eighties generations artists heralded by Supangkat in the 9<sup>th</sup>. Unlike their elders,

the younger artists still had very limited international experience. They lived on the restive street, interacting with student movements, NGOs and the forces of the New Order. While they were mainly Javanese, the nineties artists were also critical of the turn which Indonesian conceptual practices had turned. In line with Supangkat's identification of conceptualism with postmodernism, there was a distinct cultural turn in the art forms. This takes the form of Indonesian artist exploring their cultural identities. This self reflexivity about cultural identity, in most cases Javanese, fit well into the global trend of a type of postmodernism which promoted pluralism and multiculturalism.

But such language had a price in Indonesia, where the concept of Java was utilized as a New Order legitimation tool, as Pemberton, Geertz, and the Binal artists recognized. While the culture oriented artists could argue that their deployments of Java were self critical, as opposed to chauvinistic, it was problematic. As Harsono, an ethnic Chinese, noted, Indonesia was a larger concept beyond the sum of the Javanese and other ethnic groups.

Unsatisfied with these displays of Javanese, the nineties generation looked back to earlier models of conceptualism, particularly those of the readymades. GSRB provided a conceptual visual vocabulary which dealt with Indonesian material reality, one distanced from the problematic discourse of Java. The nineties generation, typical of conceptualists, were also aware of the contextual asymmetries of power, not just those of New Order. As Agung puts it very eloquently, Indonesian artists were acting like pawns in a global exhibition system which valued exoticism, in this case Javanese traditionalism. The nineties

artist would approach the international circuit with a high level of scepticism, which we will see later in the politics of the AWAS show.

If the Jogja Binal was the eruption of conceptualism in the street, *Slot in the Box* was the eruption of nineties conceptualism in the political realm. Recognized by many as the domestic show of the second half of the nineties, *Slot in the Box* introduced to the world many of the future contemporary stars of the nineties generations: Agung Kurniawan, Ade Darmawan, S Teddy, Tisna Sanjaya, Hanura Hosea, and Ugo Untoro. Older artists including Semsar, Harsono, and Edie Hara rounded out the group. It was one of the first collective shows curated by Cemeti, which had previously focused on individual artists. As Nindityo recounts, the concept behind *Slot in the Box* was a collective effort. The artists worked on the concept without the direction of a meta curator, very unlike the Jakarta 9<sup>th</sup> where Supangkat was criticized by many for his imperiousness.

The 1997 election precipitated *Slot in the Box*. Indonesian elections under the New Order were highly regulated affairs, where voters had the choice of Golkar, the ruling party of the New Order regime or its affiliated sister parties. The normal process was Golkar to win a super majority and the only variable was the percentage of the vote. But 1997 was seeing increased challenges to the legitimacy of the political system, both from the street, as well as military and other elites previously affiliated with Suharto. To that end, Suharto tried to micromanage the 97 election to avoid unexpected outcomes. A new law banned public gathering of more than 10 individuals two weeks before Election Day. This

was a cynical ploy to prevent public gatherings of a coalescing public opposition to the New Order.

Cemeti and artists responded with extreme prejudice. The title of show said it all, they were unambiguously commenting about the arbitrariness of the election process. Understood by the artists, Cemeti was going to play in the political space by subverting the ban on public gatherings. A congregation of more than 10 people in an avowedly, neutral art space like Cemeti, which had moved to larger quarters, which they occupy today.

Slot in the Box is still remembered by many as the domestic art event most connected to the period of reformasi. Besides the introduction of a very talented generation, who will go on to dominate the Indonesian contemporary scene for the next two decades, the work in the show was very new and powerful. Besides stating the obvious connection of the show with the 97 elections, the established critic Dwi Marianto describes the show as:

*“Most of the works in this exhibition throw symbolic threads that form a texture of meaning in a language that reflects the current conditions wherv people are becoming more and more strained with fear and mental terror as a result of the various forms of violence which form the reality of daily life...The expressions that become signs there, are really the products of a culture of violence, a monopoly on information and interpetation which is the current phenomenon. Or what also often happens, the metaphorical language and style of the works unwittingly imitate or become the extension of the culture of violence that comes forward. Most of the works here are expressed using various idioms which teroize metnally with a psychological jerk from the physical form and from the associative meanings of the works.” (Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery 1997)*

I quote Marinato’s criticism in depth because it opens the door to understanding the art works, beyond the usual art and activism angle. I would argue that the power of much of Slot in the Box lies in appropriating the original conceptual



strategies seen in the seventies. While Marianto does not use the word of readymades, he talks about the use of “symbols”, although the better description would be “objects” that imitate everyday life. A look at the art work would support this interpretation:

S Teddy’s piece “*Awat tumbuh ilalang di kepala anda*” or *Don’t let wild grass grow on your head* is very illustrative. Lalang or wild grass is placed in a hollowed out sculptural head like a vase. (see exhibit 19) The head is mounted on table stand, with an open drawer, revealing many ping pong balls. Teddy employed the readymade strategy to the extreme: the head was a leftover from an incomplete art work by a friend of his. For Teddy, the artwork commented on the empty, mindless associated with the Indonesian public. Basically, their minds were sprouting garbage, as symbolized in the lalang lalang wild grass. Interestingly, he used ping pong balls to represent snippets of text, basically the text buckets used in comic books to represent dialogue. The ping pong balls were also chosen for their aural qualities, a certain monotony of tuk tak. Teddy felt the balls represented the lack of control of the masses amidst impersonal forces of power, being peddled to and through.

Both Niditoyo and Teddy also emphasize the power of Yustoni Volunteero’s piece *Open the Freezer, Find your Fresh President*. (see exhibit 20) “Tony” Volunteero was well regarded by his peers, but never did become one of the stars of the nineties generation. The work consisted of a small fridge, with a fresh suit lying inside it. The exterior of the fridge is marked by a dabbed slogan, “*Awat kulkas*” or beware refrigerator. At one level, the piece is describing the selling of

the presidency, where political legitimacy gets marketed like a consumer product and citizens find their leaders through the agency of the unseen political forces. From a conceptual perspective, Volunteero is pointing to the ambiguity of the readymade, echoing Marianto's warning: the readymades are terror products in the current environment.

Conceptual strategies seek to bridge the gap between art and life with the readymade object. It finds mediation of the artist problematic because it involves agency and emotion, distorting the message. In a life fraught with terror, it seems inevitable that the found objects invoke this similar sense. Marianto later argues that only a sense of humor or playfulness alleviates this problem. He points to a Tisna Sanjaya piece "*Air Kaki*" which blended installation with a performance event. The gallery displayed a foot wash which Tisna used to wash the feet of football players after a game in the public space near the alun alun.

The show is a barrage of objects. (see exhibit 21) Hosea uses a water cooler and torso of a fashion mannequin; Wahyu uses caterpillars and fiber glass ears; Prabandono uses cow brains and formaldehyde jars; and even Edy Hara, the greater master of drawings, uses a glass box and a weekly rotation of objects. There were a few exceptions. Semsar did a very traditional painting, depicting the agonies of the Indonesian soul. Agung Kurniwan did a black and white sketch about a set of clownish characters titled the Holy Family, alluding to Suharto and his kleptocratic clan. (see exhibit 22) Perhaps, Agung's piece exemplifies the most direct blurring of art and politics, there is little mediation. Outside the

gallery, *Slot in the Box* launched two performances. While Tisna's *Air Kaki* was playful, Harsono's *Korban* or *Victim* was brutal and extremely direct.

As noted in the earlier chapter, the connection between nineties generation artist and the pioneers of the seventies centered around Harsono who moved to Jogja in the mid nineties after the Binal. The physical presence of the ever young Harsono pushed many artists in their explorations given the strong collaborative nature of the avant garde in those days. Harsono gave reality to the myth of GSRB and the conceptualists.

For *Slot in the Box*, Harsono goes to Alun Alun. As discussed in Chapter 4, this was the center of the hegemonic universe of the New Order regime, rooted in a Javanese cosmological legitimacy. Not only does he flaunt the ban on the laws of public gathering, he does it in the most public space in Jogja. Harsono then takes a chainsaw and destroys wooden torsos tied in charis; he then proceeds to set the chopped up items ablaze. (see exhibit 23) Like *Kuda Binal*, he tackles the violence of the regime head on, suggesting it is built upon murder. Harsono then proceeds to build an installation at Cemeti from the charred items from the installation piece. (see exhibit 24) Even compared to Harsono's body of works, never known for their subtlety, this was a very new level of directness.

Nindityo gives a very different reading of *Korban*, seeing the work as mainly installation driven. Harsono focused on the outcomes of the performance, in this case the burnt objects, rather than in the performance itself. Nindityo also sees this in *Kuda Binal*, suggesting that Heri Dono was doing performing arts as

opposed to performance. Namely, Heri Dono was never engaged in performing, but directing performers.

In the case of Harsono, the installation-centric interpretation seems to be consistent with his entire conceptual direction. For the self effacing Harsono, it was always about the object and communicating the problem with the audience. It was seldom about Harsono. Intriguingly, Harsono literally puts on a mask before his performance. He gets his face painted in the style of a Chinese opera character in vivid shades of pink before the destruction begins.

Things came to a head in 1997. The elections were won by Golkar, but they lost their residual legitimacy with the middle class and the military elites. 1997 also saw the spread of the Asian financial crisis which saw the massive devaluation of the Indonesian rupiah. The legitimacy of the New Order basis technocratic, economic progress was destroyed by the forces of global capital. Goods were in shortage, people's savings were wiped out as the crony associated banking system collapsed, and prices skyrocketed. Indonesia fell under IMF management. The falling of economic dominoes sent millions of students into the streets. The New Order reacted with its usual brutality, gunning down students in Jakarta. Its few supporters in the middle class finally said enough, with even the stockbrokers of the exchange going on strike. Suharto resigns and his vice president Habibie takes over.

## CHAPTER 5.2: THE AWAS SHOW

The end of authoritarianism was a difficult period. Unleashed from the control of the New Order regime, diverse social forces and factions vented their emotions and interests on the street. The period was marked by extreme lawlessness and violence, including intercommunal and interethnic violence, a directed rape and murder campaign against Chinese women, and general collapse of law and order marked by looting. The army played a shadowy role, suspected of fomenting some of the violence. On the other hand, Indonesia became a real democracy with all the open conflict and excesses of speech that involved.

Few of the nineties artists could claim a heroic role in the massive protests which brought the regime down. S Teddy tells how he locked himself away and hid friends who were being hunted by military death squads. Even the socially active Agung became a mere spectator amidst the change. Only Semsar gets caught directly in the violence. At a student protest, he gets arrested by the police, gets tortured, and ends up leaving the country.

Ironically, the drama of reformasi expanded the market for conceptual art work with activist theme. Agung tells of a barrage of NGO workers visiting him looking for critical activist art work. He also tells about many eighties generation artists returning to Indonesia and producing political art. It is in this environment that the AWAS show was born. An Australian artist Damon Moon was living in Jogja in that period. He does street art projects with Mella, Nindityo's Dutch wife. Moon felt the new art emerging in the era post reformasis needed to be seen

internationally. Moon, Mella and a German curator Alexandra Kuss proceeded to organize a show under the auspices of Cemeti and approached various foreign institutions to show it.

Despite the mass scope of the AWAS show, its organizers were individuals operating outside the traditional global exhibition circuit. Moon was an artist in the right place and time. Kuss was extremely well regarded for her fluency in the language, a very unique trait among foreign curators; but she faded away post AWAS. Only Mella stayed in the international circuit, developing a performance oriented practice focusing on feminist concerns. Yet these amateurs curated a show, unprecedented in power and scope.

Besides many of the nineties generation first seen in *Slot in the Box*, AWAS also focused on the powerful collectives being created by even younger artists. The two most important of which was Taring Padi and Apotik Komik. Taring Padi, as discussed earlier, was a self conscious reincarnation of the Kerakyatan art projects advanced by LEKRA. For our purposes, Taring Padi offers a very important critique to conceptualism. As we have argued in our introduction, the major weakness of Seni Kontekstual, as postulated by Seng, is that conceptualism did not have any monopoly on resistance agenda. In fact, kerakyatan, in its various forms, was the vehicle for the majority of resistance art in Indonesian art history. As aggressive proponents for this tradition, Taring Padi would hammer away at the pretensions and contradictions of the conceptualists over the course of the AWAS show.

Firstly, Taring Padi had little time for the pluralist, poststructuralism being peddled by the GSRB ideologues like Supangkat. They objected to the long title of contemporary art, wanting to distance themselves from the poststructuralist argument. They suggested that AWAS should be renamed Recent Art from Java. They had very little time for the international posturing of the poststruturalist given the realities of the massive and concrete social change happening on the ground,

Taring Padi also had issues with Cemeti, arguing that art should not take place solely within a gallery sytem, irrespective of their progressive credentials. While the Taring Padi objections are petty, they are important in that they push the entire art and politics issue directly into the forefront. Indonesian conceptualism in the Harsono permutation has too often played a tenuous role with political engagement, favoring process and understanding problems. There was very little awareness about social power beyond the limited confines of New Order. At one level, Taring Padi was dead right. Art needed to engage directly with the people, which they define as the oppressed classes. In their view, the conceptualists avoided this issue by focusing on generalities like process and communication.

Apotik Komik, composed of Popok Triwahyudi, Samuel Indramata, and Ari Dayanto, offered a very different challenge to Indonesian conceptualism. Apotik spoke in a very direct street style, inspired by comic books. (see exhibit 25) It was extremely direct and had little of the search of the right symbols or objects. In fact it was making a mockery of the entire communication process, suggesting

that a more stripped low literalism was the means rather than elaborate process.

Of all people, ironically, Harsono seems to get the essence of their challenge.

*'Education is an extension of the arm of authority with academic regulations that gives no room for experiment or play. Meanwhile, off campus, performance art, installation, and other works flourishing were considered overly serious. This condition prompted these young student artists to ask: 'Must visual art be serious?' For them, creativity is not invariably identified with seriousness. These young artists felt that play was a necessary part of creativity, because from play comes bright ideas.'*

So, besides the usual anti-academicism, Apotik was operating outside the bounds of Indonesian conceptualism. It was this strange sense of play once again, already alluded by Marianto in *Slot in the Box*. How do we understand this continued emphasis on play? An uncharitable interpretation would just attribute to the type of dillentatnism associated with youth being emphasized by art critics whose understanding of art and power is impoverished by lack of serious social theory. Apotik Komic is the flip side of the Taring Padi critique. Caught in its own pedanticism, Indonesian conceptualism is vulnerable to critiques operating from within the same anti elite visual language but with very different agendas. From Taring Padi's perspective, the lack of coherent social theory make the progressive aesthetics of the conceptualists hollow. From the Apotik Komics perspective, the lack of a coherent social theory make the progressive aesthetics of the conceptualist overly serious.

This dilemma can be seen in the drawn out battle over the catalogue for the AWAS show. For an art show which purportedly documents the triumph of progressive



art over a repressive politics, the tone is notably sour. There is very little triumphalism. In fact, the tone can be almost described as a type of fatism.

The first permutation of the catalogue was a product of the Australians. The Cemeti curatorial triumvirate prepared their texts and sent a version to the Melbourne's Indonesian society, who at best can be charitably described as liberal fellow travelers with a comic book impression of reformasi.

Communications went dead with the Australians, bringing the usual paranoia about asymmetries of power between the white people, although ironically the curatorial triumvirate were ethnically caucasian, so the entire Homi Bhabesque critique would have been a bit stretched. Given the larger geopolitical context with the Australians leading a military intervention in East Timor which was undergoing an extreme form of post reformasi violence, the high handedness of the nice liberals in Melbourne certainly caused much recriminations.

When the Cemeti crew finally saw the Australian catalogue, they were utterly outraged. So much to the extent that they metaphorically burned the thousands of copies, if nothing the liberals were rich and printed many of them. For the rest of the prolonged global show which lasted almost a year, Cemeti reprinted an entirely new version at large costs to themselves. What offended them? Firstly, the usual indignities about authorship with the Melbourne version not giving credit to Cemeti, who actually did commission the project and did the leg work. Secondly, the Australians appended a whole set of essays emphasizing the entire art as activism in the most simplistic liberal sense, a type of Queensland lite with little of the concessions to multi modernisms. The heroic artists, with all their

muckraking glamor, took down the murderous New Order regime. Or as Kuss puts it in her essay, *“a difference needs to be established between artists that just report on political events and the artists that seek out the symptoms behind these events.”* The AWAS show represented the later, but the Australian catalogue essays were portraying them as naïve do gooders.

The offensive articles included a banal history of Indonesian art by ironically Arief Budiman of GSRB Pasa Raya fame and a forgettable foreword. But these were small indignities, compared to the two written by Astri Wright and Laine Bermain. The Canadian academic Wright was one of the seminal Western interpreters of Indonesian art. She combined liberal activism (the New Order are nasty people) with the type of Sudojono lyricism. In a rambling 20 page essay, Wright focuses on activist art. Her cast of characters were the old favorites of the Queensland circuit: Dadang, Semsar, and Arahmaiani: only Arahmaiani was marginal in AWAS. The essay consists of emails from artists' testifying to the chaos of life post reformasi. Devoid either of coherent social theory or any aesthetic understanding, Wright veers on the biographical. Activist artists are characterized by their concern, although celebrity seems to help.

The offensiveness of the Wright piece to the AWAS organizers is pretty obvious. It went into the proverbial trash bin. Besides the patronising tone and hero worship, the essay barely addressed the artists in the show. Wright is out of touch with any reality in Indonesia and is trapped with the thoughts of eighties artists, who can be described as tourists at best, being absent in the international circuit. But on a more substantive level, Wright simply doesn't get conceptualism.

Since her art history is one of personalities and covered in the lyricism of the Sudojono Indonesian soul, she is oblivious to the entire conceptual project. In fact, she lumps Harsono into art and activism mode, equating him with Moelyono and Christanto.

I want to argue that the ugliness associated with the AWAS catalogue stems from a self doubt afflicting the conceptualists. Kuss captures it well in her essay. But returning to Laine's essay, "*The Art of Street Politics in Indonesia*", Laine's essay was nothing like Wright. In fact, it was a fairly sophisticated social analysis about the paradoxes of conceptual art's engagement with politics, although she does not use conceptual art language.

She begins by analyzing how the New Order exerted its hegemony through the control of mass ideology on the street, be it through rituals like the elections, as well as mass media images like billboards. Like this paper, she uses Pemberton's deconstruction of the image of Java as the underpinning of the New Order system. But then she poses the really interesting question. What happens when this ideological system collapses? How does art reappropriate the street to build a counter discourse when the forces of repression recess. Her answer goes back to Pasaraya Dunia Fantasia. Artists appropriate the images of mass culture from the street, be it stickers, t-shirts, graffiti, or comics, as their means to engage the masses. But Laine refuses to allow the conceptualists to side step the problems with this process. She identifies the masses as the rakyat or people, referring to the kerakyatan tradition of the left. She indicts the interaction of the artist with the people:

*“Artists attest to their social concerns through appropriating the objects of the streets in what Bourdieu called strategies of condescension. Repetition has drained these images of their impact. Described as consumption without essence, Moelyono argues that these repetitive symbols are evidence of an extremely narrow understanding of the words most often used: freedom and equality. There is, he claims, an abusive visual hegemony among artist which has weakened the power of words and images. As a result, the previously ‘marginal’ has become the mainstream. (Berman 1999, 83)*

This is a fairly sophisticated critique with very little jargon. Rephrasing it in the terms of Indonesian conceptualism, the liberation of the masses from New Order hegemony has changed the terms of the debate. Previously, the conceptualist used the readymade to communicate to a silenced population under massive restrictions on freedom of speech. Now, this population can be spoken to directly, or even more significantly, can speak back. What is the implication of an artistic strategy? Laine suggests that it gets exhausted and cliched. The readymade implodes in post reformasi Indonesia.

Ironically, Laine’s essay is the only one which really gives due to the significance of Apotik and Taring Padi. She sees them reshaping the landscape of the streets post reformasi. Kuss skips the collectives and focuses on the eighties and nineties artists. Quickly she dismisses the liberal art activism focus of Wright, she describes them as *“works with a mission that could be summarized in just one sentence as ‘one liners.’* She then redefines a more layered art, which I argue is Indonesian conceptualism, which deals with the deeper symptoms, echoes of Harsono’s process art and studying problems. But Kuss identifies the current malaise with conceptual art:

*“The distance between artist and audience or artwork and target communities is considered critical by AWAS artists. They move in a field of field of tension, between*

*the effort to be close to the public/audience and the individual spheres of their world....Especially in the Indonesian context, artist that recognize that art as a visual language has limitations in its ability to communicate with its audience. Heterogeneity and profound oral tradition in Indonesia problematise the situation...The awareness of distance encourages these artist to seek alternative forms of communication with the aim not to be too verbal or too distant from the public/audience.” (Kuss 2000)*

Alternative forms of communication suggest the readymade, so does the artwork which dominates AWAS. The great drawer Agung Kurniawan creates a piece called Souvenirs of the Third World, where he gets local artisans to build a phalanx of pushcarts. (see exhibit 26) S Teddy takes old military uniforms and uses them as canvases of provocative symbols about contemporary politics. (see exhibit 27) Tisna Sanjaya uses T shirts, silk screens them in Mooi Indies style pastoralism, but uses text to highlight places of massacres during reformasi. Agus Suwage takes a military tent and pictures with garish mass culture posters.(see exhibit 28) But Kuss doesn't really answer why this heightened tension.

An earlier, rather rambling piece by postmodern critic Ruezki Zaelani, included in all versions of the catalogue, contextualizes the problem:

*“Perhaps Gonewan Mohamd was acknowledging reality, when commenting on the (community) marketplace he spoke of the danger now of drowning in people because the market is full of commotion and hordes of individuals In this noisy place, the individual is threatened by the crowd, little people (orang kecil) become jealous, our neighbors nibble constantly at our autonomy (kemandirian)...Rather than enjoying reward for its merit, Indonesian contemporary art is in the middle of a tempest with the drastic changes in recent times reaching a point where the waves of information as well as opportunities advance, and the possibilities of information technology bombard our understanding. This has reached the point where all things become sensations and differences of substance are almost lost.” (Zaelani 2000, 19)*

In short, the new freedoms have changed the landscape, making the readymade more problematic. The masses have become very real and they are talking insanely. The role of art in mediating politics is now obsolete, now politics is art. Not surprisingly, both Laine and Zaelani bring up some of the problems identified in the eighties with the distinction between Moelyono and Harsono. Moelyono recognized that a process based art was pretty hollow without a larger theory of subjectivity, in his case the conscientization of the oppressed classes. While Harsono could retreat into process in the eighties, given the distance created by New Order hegemony, now the material of the process—mass media and material reality—has taken a life of its own. Without a concept of a mass subjectivity, the masses increasingly look very threatening. The relationship between the omnipresent conceptual artist and the masses has destabilized. As Nindityo noted, Cemeti was a bit shocked when Taring Padi dared to challenge the terms of conceptual art despite their inclusion.

Kuss then details two strategies the conceptualists employ in AWAS to deal with the problem. The first one was a strange type of conscientization strategy, but in Kuss's terms *"initiating processes through communication and interaction."* In short, engaging communities and audiences with the art works. She points to Nindityo and Agung engaging artisan communities to build their manufactured readymades. Tisna Sanjaya's interaction with the street through his wearing and circulation of the beautiful Indonesian T shirts is also mentioned. Kuss' definition can be criticized, since many contemporary mediums necessitate the narrowing of distance, most particularly performance. But she does touch on a legitimate

point: the days of omnipresent conceptualism is over, engaging the audience is the key. Ironically, Moelyono recognized this point decades ago.

Kuss then distinguishes a second tendency among the AWAS work, works which focus on social and cultural realities. Alas, this is pretty broad category which almost makes it useless, given no art is really divorced from broader reality. But she also notes:

*“Part of the AWAS works present the artists in the form of self portraits as well in a disguised and metaphorical way, which can both be interpreted as a manifestation of their search for personal identity and an attempt to define the position of artists in society. As individuals with background in communal culture, they express their individuality and at the same time attempt to come closer to society. The tension between these two poles, individual and society, stimulates the creative process. (Kuss 2000, 27)*

Kuss stumbles upon the crisis of Indonesian conceptualism. If the process does not solve the problem and the masses are threatening, it seems like a retreat into the self may be the order. This is a very huge break for Indonesian conceptualism. Started as a revolt against the Indonesian soul and the entire subjective lyricism, the self has disappeared. Even in the eighties, the postmodern conceptualist employed the term culture, as opposed to personality. The reintroduction of the self into the equation is revolutionary.

Kuss's prime case of this break is Agus Suwage. Highly bid by the marketplace these days for his fairly outrageous self-portraiture, many forget that Suwage was part of the nineties generation. In fact, Suwage had a very interesting conceptual phase where he modified readymade objects like becak. His work in AWAS is interesting for it blends the found object type conceptualism with portraiture. In his work, he sets up a military tent and then covers it with lurid movie posters

advertising soft porn films. The main twist is that he incorporates very demented self portraits of himself in ridiculous and ironic posts. Almost paraphrasing Gonewan's observation about the flood of mass imagery in art, Kuss notes:

*"Suwage expresses a critical stance towards a phenomena that has emerged during the era of reformation that everything is sensationalized and is made hot news since the press is no longer strictly censored and tabloids are mushrooming up. The empty sensations of advertising billboards do not differ from sensational newspaper headlines. Visitors to the military tent are invited to rest on a cap bed and 'enjoy' the crushing abundance of surrounding pictures experiencing the pressure that is already mentioned in the title of the work."*

In short, the explosion of freedom and mass media objects renders the analytical possibility of the readymade object obsolete. While using the readymade strategy, Suwage recognizes its futility. The artist and audience are invited to a passivity and irony, very different from the avant gardism presumed by all since GSRB.

The limits of the conceptual gaze and its consequences are reflected in the work and biography of Agung Kurniawan and Harsono, who was not in the AWAS show. As mentioned before, Agung's *Souvenirs From the Third World* was one of the seminal pieces of AWAS. But this piece was unusual in several ways. Firstly, Agung was a drawer. His medium was the line and paper. For *Souvenirs*, he employs the three dimensionality of the ready made. According to Kuss, he wanted to materialize his drawings. In our interviews, he does not really explain why he made this transition, which was seldom repeated afterwards. But Agung is very explicit about the goal of *Souvenirs*: it was about the futility of art. In his view, even conceptualism has degenerated into commodification. Like the peddler carts of the piece, Indonesian art has become objects to be peddled in the global



exhibition circuit, allowing liberal western audiences a vicarious voyeurism of Indonesian suffering. In the piece, there is a wooden figure called the curator, bedecked in a Superman costume and sprouting a long Pinnocho nose. (see exhibit 29)

For an artist whose conceptualism was forged in the successful Jogja 92 Binal which took the street from the New Order, this was a very radical turnaround. Unlike many of the others, Agung was an intellectual and very aware of the dynamics between power and aesthetics through his reading of social theory. His condemnation of the Indonesian conceptual project is stunning. It was not only *Souvenirs* which marked Agung's conversion. Post AWAS, Agung did not make art for nearly three years, confining himself to home and playing play video games.

This turn away from conceptualism is also seen in the evolution of Harsono. As detailed in this entire thesis, Harsono articulated Indoneisan conceptualism in all its ambition despite years in its wilderness. But by 1999, something had changed. The reformasi violence engulfed the Indonesian Chinese community, whose members were attacked by mobs and property destroyed by mobs, suspicious of their wealth. This affected Harsono tremendously.

He began turning away from progressive conceptualism into a very personalized art making. He confesses:

*"After the Soeharto regime fell, a culture of violence became even more prevalent in our society. Witnessing the ambivalence towards the fate of the people on one hand and the narrow minded priority places on each group's own needs sickened me at this time. My pessimism and revulsion pushed me into leaving behind the social themes of my work. I felt disorientated about morals, ethics, and even nationalism. I felt that whenever these were bandied about, they were empty*

*slogans without any meaning whatsoever ... During such a change, I attempted to take another look at myself.”* (H. Wiyanto 2010, 156)

Harsono's works in the early 2000s evolved into explorations of personal identity through a background of personal impersonation, which has been taboo previously. In *Cognito Ergo Sum*, he interposes six figures of hands gestures, harkening back to *Voices*, onto six blurred digital images of himself. Like Suwage, the conceptualist strategy of objects are still in play, but there is little of certainty. Only the assertion of the self and all its agonies is the counterpoint.

This evolution in Harsono, the foremost conceptualist, is revolutionary. All too often, its significance is missed to the cliched explanation of a return to narrow ethnic identity. Harsono stuck to the cause of a pan Indonesian conceptualism for almost three decades and refused to champion culturalist interpretations.

## CHAPTER 5.3: CONCLUSION

Seni Konseptual has had a rich history since the seventies. Started as an attack against academic elite painting, it evolved into a more broader strategy, capable of addressing the asymmetries of modernization in Indonesian society. Konseptual practitioners found the readymade or found object as a very powerful communicative tool, able to address the problems in Indonesian society. While more engaged in politics than postmodernist critics give them credit for, their engagement was more indirect, as opposed to the kerakyatan or people's art tradition, as exemplified by Moelyono.

Writing a history of Indonesian conceptualism requires subtlety to distinguish their aesthetic strategies from the postmodernist, the use of installations; or their political strategies from the art as activism school. Not surprisingly, this history was absent in the landmark 1999 Global Conceptualisms show at the Queen's Museum. This is a pity because Seni Konseptual contributed much to Indonesian society. Its sophisticated understanding of ideology and mass culture saw it challenge the hegemony of the New Order regime in the Jogja Binal and during the 1997 elections. That said, Seni Konseptual was limited. It did not have a theory of how to deal with the masses. While this was not fatal during the New Order, given the power of the regime to keep the masses at distance, it could not deal with the challenges of mass democracy post the fall.

My story ends with story of tentative attempts to deal with this change. As Kuss earlier noted, many escaped to the solitude of the self, Agus Suwage and

Harsono. But others looked for new models. After a three year exile from art, Agung began to do intensely personal drawing shows with homo-erotic components. He sees it as exorcising the ghosts of repression within himself, another variant of the Kussian turn inward. But Agung does more. He begins to build institutions. He creates an independent arts space Kedai Kebun. He also builds IVAA, the only archive of contemporary Indonesian art. He also sees himself building an artist political party in Jogja to counter the Islamic fascists. For Agung, these institutional initiatives allowed him to bridge conceptual art with the broader society, the previously threatening people. Ade Darmawan, another nineties artist who came to fame in *Slot in the Box*, also moved in the same direction. He creates the Ruang Rupa, urban collective which applied the urban visual strategies of Pasaraya and sociological research to understanding the problems of the megapolis Jakarta. In 2010, Ruang Rupa celebrated their tenth anniversary, a hopeful sign in a country now overrun by art speculation and not friendly to conceptual art. The history of conceptualism was a tragic one: the strategies devoted to fighting the New Order ironically could not deal with the triumph of democracy post is fall. But Ade and Agung have built new models which try to bridge art with the people. This institutional resilience gives hope to the legacy of Seni Konseptual.

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