

A Local Identity for a Stylish Generation

A.

Santi and Otom are founders of the Indie Guerillas group (IG), an art workshop that employs a variety of visual media and music. They form a husband-and-wife team that also manages a design firm with the same name.

B.

The contemporary art world in the eighties was full of the spirit to return to the local identity. We are familiar of such names as Eddie Hara, Heri Dono, Mella Jaarsma, Nindityo Adi Purnama, and Dadang Christanto. They grew under the shadow of the last rebels in the Indonesian art: Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (The New Art Movement) and Kelompok Kepribadian Apa (which literally means: What Identity Group). These artists did not follow the path of their avant-gardist seniors. The local identity offered a safe haven for them, a “cage” of sorts that insulated them from the clutch of the New Order regime with its absolute grip on everyone. Elements of the local identity took the shapes of *wayang* puppets, shadows, *gamelan*, and subsequently also “Java Surrealism”.

The return to the cultural roots or traditions could be seen as a way to find protection from the state oppression and censorship. Most of the artists of the eighties are direct descendants of the repressed condition of the state with its policy to depoliticize university life through its NKK and BKK regulations (drawn up to restore and maintain order in the Indonesian universities) at the end of the seventies—the policy that served to insulate the campus from politics. To convey anything political, one needed a distinct strategy, and these artists did it by assuming a new identity—not the identity of the avant garde, but that of the local identity that also served as a protecting shield. The shield was that of the Javanese culture itself, an identity which the profoundly-Java-centric ruler would not question.

With *wayang*, Heri Dono was free to criticize the power practices of the state; with the *sanggul*—the Javanese female traditional bun worn at the nape—and dance patterns, Nindityo could talk about the involuted and static nature of the Javanese culture. The artwork imbued with the spirit of the local identity masks the social commentary within the artwork. It is at this point that the “local identity group” differs from its predecessor, “the last Avant-Gardists”, or the artists in Jim Supangkat’s generation. “The Avant-Gardists” were involved in a direct confrontation with the young New Order state in the middle to the end of the seventies. They were direct and transparent with their criticism. One of the reasons was their distrust toward the “old group”, the Javanese culture that had been co-opted by the power holder, and the centralized power of the state. They were an immediate part of the student movement in the seventies. Such direct confrontations did not take place only in Yogyakarta, but also in Bandung.

The subsequent generation conveyed their criticism or social commentary in indirect ways. The audience, however, was still able to sense or even see the criticism—the reason being the political situation at the time, which made people see only one enemy, i.e. the New Order regime and its apparatus. The criticism and social commentary, therefore, found their outlets in the contemporary artwork, political jokes, and caricatures in the national newspapers—all forming a grey realm that could easily dodge political censorship due to its heavy reliance on symbols and metaphors. Art thus assumed the position of “the other language”. Although all the social commentaries had been veiled, people who were oppressed and had practically no channel for political expressions became more perceptive toward such metaphors.

Such politics of evasion did not take place all of a sudden. The early works of these artists were highly formalistic in nature. One could not detect any political ideas there. Their initial rebellions were merely about the use of media or other methods of painting that the university did not allow. The political ideas strengthened at the end of the nineties as the New Order regime grew older and each of these artists acquired a stronger bargaining power as their access to the international art world became established.

The symptom of ‘turning local’ did not only take place in Indonesia, but also within the Southeast Asian region:

in the Philippines it took the form of the artists' movement in the city of Baguio (the Baguio Arts Guild); in Malaysia, the "decorative abstract art"; in Singapore, the "Artists' Village"; and so forth. Although each country had a different pattern, the movement to "return to the root" was prevalent in the early nineties. Some international curators considered it to be characteristic of the region and called it the "Revised Myths", or "concern for origin". The phenomenon to return to the local roots became established. The artists were busily going back-and-forth, from one international airport to another, their bank accounts swelled, and their waistlines expanded accordingly. The political situation became more open, while the society became more expressive in conveying their ideas. Slowly but surely this "language" was replaced by another kind of art (language).

When the Indie Guerillas (IG) re-uses this local identity, how should we interpret it?

C.

IG grew up in an era that is different from those of its aunts and uncles. The group took shape as the contemporary art discourses became established. There was no controlling ruler. The end of the nineties was the era of the "Crazy Indonesia". Everything was possible, everything was allowed. Indonesia was akin to a young man drunk with self-concocted drugs. The powerful government of the previous era was no longer there. It was a time of transitions; an interregnum.

This changing situation made some artists who had been used to presenting social issues stop working. However, the era proved to be very beneficial for IG. The creative realm that shapes the character of their artwork is a multivisual and multimedia world. The previously fearsome art school has collapsed. The art lecturers, who had been backed up and protected by the patron-state, have lost their time. Government-installed cultural institutions have become the home for *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes. In short, the Big Guy is on leave, and everyone is prancing around.

The loss of patron makes the works by artists of this generation fluid and not segregated: there is openness toward all varieties of media, without having to be occupied by the needs to seek political correctness behind the choices of the media. Theirs is an apolitical generation, the apple of New Order's eye.

IG's artwork is categorized into themes. Their latest works generally present *wayang* characters. They create these characters by adding elements of the pop culture: sport shoes, symbols of consumptive products, etc. As we know, character is the key word for us to understand the latest tendency among the young artists in Yogyakarta. They need characters to set their works apart. This is different from the works by the previous generation of artists, which had been distinguished by the choice of theme, the brushwork, or the subject matter.

IG creates characters by embarking on a research about the riches of their culture. They found what they were seeking in the world of *wayang purwa*. Instead of simply adopting these characters, Indie Guerillas chose to spice these characters up by using a kind of social commentary. The commentary, however, is never harsh. The IG artists are revealing their concerns instead of conveying criticism. Perhaps this is because they are used to working as graphic designers. Accustomed to serving clients, they have no tradition of presenting harsh, sharp criticism. Their social commentary resembles more soft self-criticism, as befit their apolitical and pragmatic generation.

Indie Guerillas employ the *wayang* characters just like the puppet masters use them to reflect about life. The characters are symbols or metaphors of the daily situations. *Wayang* as a symbol is viewed as having served its purpose; it has become established, so much so that no further criticism is required. This resembles the criticism of the leftist artists who considered the *wayang* as a part of Javanese feudalism.

To Indie Guerillas, one no longer has to criticize the medium itself. The issue, according to them, is more about how to present the criticism or the social commentary. With the method they employ, the social commentary becomes distorted and sublimated. The audience, if one may still use the term, will be fascinated by the

technical expertise and the unique characters that the artists are presenting. It is possible that the audience will not sense the artists' shrewdness. The "hordes" that are the art audience today are not people who desire alternative messages or media. They are buyers or users in its practical sense. My experience with this art audience tells me so far that they are a crowd who does not care about the content, but rather about what they see on the surface. They are a crowd that is different from the previous art audience.

The social commentary that IG presents is actually directed toward the artists themselves. As direct descendants of the New Order regime, children of McDonald and accessible education and cheap rice, it is normal for them to question their ambiguous nature. I call them "happy victims". To be free from the clutch of the "original sin", they need self-criticism. *Wayang* provides the materials to do that, and IG has employed it effectively and efficiently.

While the generation of Dadang Christanto, Nindityo Adi Purnomo, and Eddie Hara—to mention a few from the scores of artists of the eighties—employed the tradition as a part of their efforts to avoid state censorship, Indie Guerillas and today also Eko Nugroho and Jompet use them for different purposes. It is not a political choice; rather, it is based on the desire to be stylish. Or perhaps the return to the roots can also be seen as the journey to search for an identity in the midst of the homogenizing process of the globalization and the market. The return to the origin is akin to a pilgrimage for the rootless generation. They visit the grave of their local identity while scraping the remains that they can bring back to their present world.

Indeed, the time for art to serve as a political vehicle has ended. Today is the time for the generation of artists who view art just like they do any other "secular" art forms: graphic design, product design, and crafts. It is in today's era that these artists discover a world they call home.

Agung Kurniawan
Artist