

Suddenly, we arrived... polarities and paradoxes of Indonesian contemporary art¹

The Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei's *Sunflowers Seeds* commission that was showcased at the *Turbine Hall* of Tate Modern, in London, in late 2010, were not explicitly Chinese. Nevertheless, one could sense the Chinese identity of the installation through its sheer immensity – one hundred million seeds – a sophisticated evocation of delicacy, labour and craft that also referred to the importance of porcelain in Chinese history and heritage.

A similarly subtle approach is largely responsible for the success of contemporary art from Indonesia: works reveal their 'Indonesianess' without necessarily being literal, relying on the viewer's own imagery of the country to complete the picture. However, we, who are not Indonesian, have come to know the country through its globalised images, primarily its beautiful beaches, its natural disasters and the disgrace that follows terrorist attacks. This image, as we all know, is a very reductive one. The result is that the specificities of the artist's message may be lost in the preconceptions of the audience. For many Indonesian artists, who are unfamiliar with the common language of the international arena, understanding how best to get their point across is a problem that remains unanswered.

Syncretism and 'in-betweeness': aspects of Indonesia's current situation

The problem is not specifically territorial; in fact, what is lost in cultural transmission to the outside world – and is paradoxically the most interesting element of much of the artists' work – is the 'driving force' that constitutes Indonesia's cultural energy. In my opinion, the most successful works in Indonesia are those that remain honest and truthful about the nature of the country, its heritage and (what could be said to be the) 'inert graciousness' of its people. Their success is directly related to notions of 'flattening' in its history: the country has an extremely complex legacy of external occupation (that in some senses remains ongoing) and, as a consequence, a multi-layered culture that cross-references and borrows influences from elsewhere in the world.

At this present moment, Indonesia might be one of the most highly crossed-cultured of the world's societies: borrowing from North America its fast food and aspects of its material life, displaying its religiosity with the Arab garb, all pooled with Chinese goods and financial power. This on-going show in the nation's daily life creates an atmosphere of constant excitement, whilst its population struggles to absorb and integrate the new values without wiping out its already convoluted history. 'Syncretism', this layering of one culture atop the other, without either being erased, can therefore be considered one of Indonesia's strongest elements, of its civilisation and, as in so many moments of its past, Indonesia is again finding ways to integrate current cultural, religious, political and economic imports.

This results in a fascinating 'in-betweeness' of the country, inherent in its DNA, derived from its geographical disparities and constant change; just as the country itself is volatile, so its art suffers the same fluctuating condition, with even its leading artists only intermittently represented in high-profile events such as the **Venice Biennale**. This condition can be seen in the work of Bandung-based J. Ariadhitya Pramuhendra in his series *Lost in...*, in which he depicts himself at the most prestigious Western art institutions, like the **Guggenheim** in New York.

Indonesia's artists struggle to find a language, a voice that is respected and credited outside of their immediate homeland. The crossed culture, referred to above, permits them to speak in global terms through local conditions and experiences. Established artists including Eko Nugroho show a deep understanding of their society, whilst analysing issues such as Islamic

and modern life-style changes in Java; similarly Jompert Kuswidananto reveals an extensive body of knowledge of post-colonial Java. These approaches, as further exemplified by Entang Wiharso, demonstrate a 'syncretic turn' regarding his surrounding culture, contaminating it with his own personal histories. Yet despite the internationalisation of their experience, it remains the case that artists and agents mostly remain busy with local concerns. Although the most local of Indonesian issues have an international dimension – some of the most important themes in contemporary art practices are notions of its national identity, tradition and how it impacts developing societies, religion and spirituality, the role of women in society, and also political, social and environmental concerns – some artists are making very literal works that don't add much to the discourse. In many cases, especially when considering younger generations, the artists remain uncertain as to what contribution their activity will make to the panorama.

In Indonesia, often the art works are polarized between 'voices with native intent' such as Nasirun's and the more successful 'comic-art' and 'neo-pop' of groups including Ruangrupa. This polarity makes one question: 'what is Indonesian about this art?' In fact, the country possesses as much variety in its arts and ways of expression as any other major country of the world, due not only to its traditional arts, but how it impacts its contemporary practices.

Therefore, the recent intense interest in Indonesia from the outside world should come as no surprise; this crossed-cultureness attributes potential to its art, gives a new swing to the panorama of the worlds' contemporary art practices. Since its local influences contain elements from different locales as far apart as India, China and the Netherlands, one or two elements of a certain work can remind the viewer of his own national references.

Even though the presence of non-Western art is vastly unrepresented in grand events such as **documenta**^{2/3}, the growing presence of these agents – especially since 2002 – is the result of several aspects; above all, great craft and refined finishing. The days of this ideological curse are long passed. The world has moved 'beyond' the Orientalist view that has cornered for so long these artists. No longer does the Western world frame this art in terms of its exoticism, rather in the condition of its making.

Lack of institutions: space for freedom or a cause of weakness?

Indonesia, like many countries in the Southern world has yet to find government institutions that support its art. As a consequence, hybrid spaces have emerged. The curator Shaheen Merali has said, in reference to India: these are «not so much museums but galleries, sometimes artist run initiatives located within households, and one of the most alarming outcomes of such a lack of national infrastructure is that key examples of work by [the country's] greatest artists remain in homes [...]»⁴. One very famous example of such a homegrown institution is the **OHD Museum of Modern & Contemporary Indonesian Art**⁵, property of the renowned collector Dr. Oei Hong Djien, which has contributed widely to the maintenance of key-works from Indonesian modern and contemporary artists in the country. This deficit leads institutions like **Singapore Art Museum** to buy much – in fact it remains a key-buyer of almost all of the most important art from Indonesia. Two contributing facts have created this reality: Singapore's geographical proximity, and its commercial galleries interest in exhibiting art from Indonesia. In this regard, these aspects may be an extremely positive signs for the future.

Although Merali is stating the fact about India, the parallels with Indonesia are striking, and his warning has repercussions for the tropical archipelago too: «In such an impoverished

condition, it seems that we are left with at best, interpretations and to a certain extent interventions that can be only guarded as private initiatives and only accessible for a given and recognised public sector»⁶.

Private facilities in Indonesia have been, as in India, actively responsible for what developments there have been to this date. The **CP Biennial**⁷, an initiative of **CP Foundation** Chairman, Djie Tjianan, himself a prominent collector of contemporary Indonesian art, and the curator Jim Supangkat, was closed after its second edition in 2005 – named *Urban/Culture*. The reasons behind this incident related to a scandal concerning the naked exposure of two public figures in a painting, by highly regarded artist Agus Suwage. Facts like this make the artist community feel disempowered.

But such obstacles have not stopped the community – from private collectors, galleries to artists – from founding and developing private art centres; as recently as 2010, Yogyakarta has been granted a new exhibition space, **Langgeng Art Foundation**⁸, property of another prominent collector, Deddy Irianto, that aims, once again, to showcase new practices to the country's growing audience.

It is manifestly interesting to watch the resistance the artistic community has towards adversity – be it a lack of support, pressures of censorship or the ongoing indifference of society at large – for it forces them to continuously re-invent themselves.

The arrival on the global artscene

The internationalisation of Indonesia's art is a recent fact; it was made through exposure at showcases such as the **Asian Pacific Triennale**⁹, in **Queensland Art Gallery**, Brisbane, Australia as well as numerous exhibitions promoted by the **Japan Foundation** in Tokyo or New York. Amongst the first Indonesian artists who found international fame – Heri Dono, Anusapati or Nindityo Adipurnomo – have acknowledged it through reflecting their identity, but only after they exited the country to study and/or exhibiting abroad. In the nineties, these artists, as well as Arahmaiani, FX Harsono and the curator Jim Supangkat, started to offer contemporary settings, borne of the Indonesian context, to overseas audiences.

Indonesia's contemporary art currently lives in a moment of excitement: even artists who are seen as 'low-key' are able to make a living from their work, by assisting the renowned ones, whilst maintaining their own art practice. This model allows them to be constantly making art, and, in turn, has contributed to high demand from collectors, and lately from auction houses. Yet this high market pressure – more evident since 2007 – is disallowing the necessary space for thought. Artists are constantly in 'producing mode' and spend less time researching, looking at new discourses and solutions for their work.

One vital ingredient or trigger for the artists' success in the international arena is the possibility to study or exhibit abroad, combined with some fluency in the *lingua franca* of the artworld: English. Post-modernity remains a vague experience in Indonesian society, and overseas contact facilitates an understanding of the ways to attribute further 'value' to their works. Nevertheless, even if this feature is not understood by the entire art world in Indonesia, there is still a great level of comprehension about several other important aspects, especially in the relations between artists, curators and the public. What remains as yet unattained is the capacity to make the connection from these agents to those of market and the media: exhibitions are critically devalued by displays of uneven quality. Given this constant state, the task of promoting the works becomes difficult. Consequently, Indonesian

art remains 'in-between', impressive, but not yet up to the professional standards required by the international art world.

The publication *Indonesian Eye*, as its title suggests, will contribute to the confidence and further vision of the artists from Indonesia, it will reflect positively in their work by exposing them to a previously unknown audience and scale. What remains a necessity is the continuation of the process and maintaining a constant dialogue with the specialists from Indonesia, without forgetting to pressure the authorities.

Indonesian Eye can mark the beginning of a new era, and it is hopefully the first of many such endeavours; making the world finally look at this unique and exciting country. If the West can learn to move beyond its preconceptions, avoid the temptation to hegemonise what it finds and look at the scene through its local specificities and inherent realities, then Indonesia may finally arrive on the international scene.

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¹ This essay was made possible thanks to interviews conducted on 10th March 2011 with artists Jompet Kuswidananto, FX Harsono, Ashley Bickerton and curator Jim Supangkat.

² <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/chin.shtm>

³ Traditionally, **documenta** is referred with lower case 'd'.

⁴ Shaheen Merali, *India Now* [paper presented at the Biennale Symposium, *Beijing 798 Biennale*, Yan Club Arts Center, 2009], (unpublished).

⁵ <http://ohd-artmuseum.blogspot.com/>

⁶ Shaheen Merali, *India Now* [paper presented at the Biennale Symposium, *Beijing 798 Biennale*, Yan Club Arts Center, 2009], (unpublished).

⁷ <http://biennale.cp-foundation.org/>

⁸ <http://langgengfoundation.org/>

⁹ **Asia Pacific Triennale** was established in 1993 in Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.