

BEYOND SOUVENIRS

The Legacy of the Indonesian Avant-Garde in the Global

BY PAUL KHOO

Part 1 **“Is there something wrong with Indonesian contemporary artists simply preoccupying themselves with the here and now? Is it not true that it might mean that they are living their life full of zest and fervor, embracing the intensity of moments, enjoying each day to the full? ...To me the problem is that this fascination with the here and now... is the lack of historical awareness, coupled with the dizziness and often inability to face what the future holds... All along the tunnel of time, both of whose ends are dark, the practices of Indonesian contemporary art can only lumber forward, teetering and sometimes rife with repetitions. Many artists simply hold on to these patterns trapped in protracted mannerism.”**

SUPRIYANTO 2009

I begin my essay with this rather extended quote from one of Indonesia's most thoughtful curators, Enin Supriyanto. 2011 has been a great year for Indonesian art, especially on the global front. Not since the *AWAS!* (BEWARE!) show traveled the world in the late nineties has Indonesian art found such a large audience abroad outside the niches of the Asian biennale circuit. But celebrity and fame do not equate progress and perhaps even relevance. Through a review of Indonesian art exhibits of 2011, encompassing both the large international mega shows and smaller domestic ones, I want to elaborate on Enin's implication of historical amnesia and its consequences. While Enin was principally focusing on political amnesia, I will also focus on art history amnesia. These two types inevitably overlap. Larger forces like globalization, the art market, and alternative institutions also impact upon this amnesia beyond the individual choices of artists. The legacy of the Seventies vanguard art movement Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB) is a useful microcosm into these issues.

Our journey could begin on the Champs-Élysées with the 2011 exhibition *Trans-Figurations/Indonesian Mythologies* organized by the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton. Inspired by French newspaper coverage about the Jogjakarta (or Yogyakarta or Jogja) art scene, the organizers of the exhibition descended upon Jogja to understand its art and its context. They returned to Paris with a curatorial theme that, in the words of curator Hervé Mikaeloff, sought to convey an atmosphere of Jogja as, “the hive of artistic creativity.” (Le Sourd 2011) To that end, the exhibition was characterized by a focus on space, both the private and semi public space of the studio, as well as the larger urban space. The rooftop gallery was transformed into several artists' studios, overlaid with a bamboo structure by the famed architect Eko Prawoto. The

choice of artists was fairly conservative with the usual names from the circuit including Heri Dono, Mella Jaarsma, Jompet Kuswidananto, and Tintin Wulia.

Besides Eko's bamboo roof, two other physical features distinguish this show. The first was a kitchen described as, “the gathering point for artists and organizers, journalists and guests: a rendez-vous à la javanaise where no meetings can be held without makan dan minum (eating and drinking).” The second was a corridor where the graffiti of the Eko Nugroho adorned the walls, suggesting the intrusion of the urban spaces of the city. The curating echoes back to the seminal exhibitions *Cities on the Move: Urban Chaos and Global Change, East Asian Art, Architecture and Films Now* of 1997 – 1999, curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, who argued that the reality of Asian modernization was tied to urbanization and hence the importance of space elements in contemporary Asian art.

What does the Paris exhibition tell us about historical amnesia in regard to Indonesian art? The show celebrates the ‘here and now’, as parodied by Enin. While trumpeting the small narratives of everyday life and shunning politics, it casually assumes larger historical mythologies, especially Java. Certainly, the Javanese have been instrumental in Indonesian cultural and political life and Jogja is the center of the Javanese universe. However, Java is not equivalent with Indonesia, which is an amalgam of multiple regional, ethnic, and religious groups, whose relationships with the dominant Javanese were problematic. An entire tradition of anthropological scholarship has studied the legitimization function of Javanese culture under the New Order dictatorship. (Pemberton 1994) It appears that the easy transition of the local to the global is highly problematic. Is it unfair to expect art history or even historical rigor from traveling foreign curators? Beneath the surface of everyday life, there are layers of historical controversies and lost histories, whose legacies dictate our understanding of the art.

In her review of the exhibition for *Nafas* magazine, Marie Le Sourd, who was director of the French Cultural Center in Jogja 2006 – 2011 and certainly not operating from a Rousseauian blank slate, seems conflicted. While approving of the execution of the show, she worries about this international attention may be short-term, fashion. In other words, Jogja art is now just another product of the global, neo-liberal art market, easily threatened by obsolescence. Le Sourd's doubts are shared by many of the players in the Indonesian art world. There is a sense that Indonesian contemporary art is now enjoying the trickle-down effect from this engagement with the globalized art boom. But this is not new. The Eighties saw a domestic art boom, although painting based, due to oil money and increased industrialization in the country. It ended badly as with most third world easy money, speculation fueled bubbles, leaving many artists in limbo. One unsaid question amidst the current boom is how much has changed. Does globalization signify new and sustainable demand? Or is the demand still driven by speculative and hot domestic money, behind the surface of overseas galleries, auction houses, and international shows? Like the myth of Java, the transition line between the local and global, even in the supposedly globalized art market, remains hazy. Easy transitions to the global may be an illusion.

Besides alluding to the tenuous alliance between the art market and Indonesian contemporary art, Le Sourd also asserts an art historical perspective. Noting that most of the artists involved in the show have twenty years of history, she stresses their engagement with alternative structures needed to support the art. She recaps the importance of Cemeti Art House, Kedai Kebun Forum, Apotik Komik, Taring Padi, along with newer spaces like Survive Garage and Fight for Rice. The majority of the older spaces were connected with art and activism movements in the nineties, culminating or evolving from the *AWAS!* exhibition. This art historical genealogy, which traces back to GSRB, cannot disappear even amidst the general amnesia abetted by the art market. But what is its meaning beyond a set of historical references?

Part 2 “One of the real symptoms of such dizziness has been the absence of a tradition of critical discourse in the practice of Indonesian contemporary art, and the mere absence of scientific research in the field of modern arts in Indonesia since 1945. The condition worsens even as the institution of the museum...has been virtually ineffective since museums were established in Indonesia... What has been blooming however is precisely the institution representing the ultimate here and now, penetrating even further into the network of global art. The market requires an artistic pattern that is stable and safe, thus creating opportunities for unbridled mannerisms, trends, and repetitions to thrive. It is this market that serves as the axis for artistic production here in Indonesia for the present day”

SUPRIYANTO 2009

The answer lies across the border. Enin argues that institutional underdevelopment viciously exacerbates historical amnesia. As such, the simple act of viewing Indonesian art history requires travel to a foreign museum, be it the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 2009 or the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany in September 2011, with *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989* show. The date 1989 alludes to the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as the influential *Magiciens de la Terre* show. The ZKM show is an ambitious retrospective, displaying the art of the other in a historical context, encompassing over fifty artists. The theoretical framework of the show, crafted by Peter Weibel and Hans Belting, is also appropriately hefty, exploring issues of “other”, global art, globalization, contemporaneity, and the art museum.

ZKM offers a welcome contrast with Paris. While not true of the other national art works in the show, the Indonesian pieces have strong art historical background. However, beyond genealogy, the thematic framing undercuts the history. The Indonesian contemporary is well documented here starting from the genesis of GSRB and evolving process wise through Agung Kurniawan or Krisna Murti; or visually through Eko Nugroho. No surprise, the organizing committee included Jim Supangkat, GSRB member and the predominant curator of the Indonesian contemporary for three decades and Southeast Asian art historian Patrick Flores. As such, the Indonesian pieces have a historical flavor and context, sorely lacking in the work included from other countries. Unfortunately, like the deliberately light Paris show, ZKM also makes the easy transition from the local to the global, although under the framing of a complex historical meta-theory.

ZKM reproduces an obscure GSRB piece by Supangkat called *Kamar Ibu dan Anak* (1975) (Bedroom of Mother and Child). Kamar consists of everyday furniture, in this case a closet, a chair, and a baby’s crib. This apparent portrait of domestic tranquility is distorted by ugly steel locks bolted onto the furniture. The installation suggests the interaction between patriarchal repression and political repression, but more importantly, it captures the aesthetic strategy of GSRB, a blurring of the boundaries between low art and high art. Arising amidst the first wave of student activism against Suharto’s New Order regime in the Seventies, GSRB attacked the privileging of high or fine art, specifically painting practices. In 1974, several art students (including FX Harsono) who became the future nucleus of GSRB presented a wreath to the organizers of the National art show, commemorating the death of Indonesian painting, an event known as Black December.

Historians have interpreted GSRB in varied ways. Southeast Asian studies scholars in Australia, notably Maklai-Miklouho who wrote the only English language history of the movement, emphasize the political activism angle against Suharto’s New Order. (Maklai-Miklouho 1991) Singaporean scholars, Ahmad Mashadi and Seng Yu Jin, have focused on the conceptual quality of the

art work linking with it with Latin American conceptualisms which emphasized the ready-made or found objects. (Seng 2009) Both approaches have deep historical validity. But Supangkat and ZKM deemphasize these readings.

For Supangkat, GSRB represented a type of vanguard movement presaging the emergence of contemporary art or synonymously global art, which Belting defines as art that ‘revolts against both art history with its Western-based meanings and against ethnic traditions, which seem like prisons for a local culture in a global world.’ (Belting 2009) The framing of *Kamar* is consistent with this interpretation. It is part of a section called *World Art: the Curiosity Cabinet from a Postcolonial Perspective*. One further nuance to the Belting terminology is World Art, basically non-Western ethnic or traditional collected by the colonialists and normally juxtaposed as inferior to modern/Western art. In the ZKM framing, GSRB revolted against both world and modern art and created a type of new global/contemporary art practice, a decade before 1989. Indonesia is another localized case of the emergence of the new global/contemporary art in the South or emerging world.

Is this valid? Yes in some ways, beyond the fairly universal high and low art polemics which go back to Duchamp, GSRB also wanted to escape the strait jacket of traditional art, which was deployed by the Suharto regime as a form of legitimation, for example the use of Javanese culture, a problem that was noted in our review of the Paris show. Yet GSRB was also wary of Western universalism. Rather they were searching for a type of Indonesian art, which was not bound by tradition. Certainly, the idea of Western-centric art history could be found in Indonesia in the Seventies, be it in the form of high modernism in the Bandung academy or socialist realism in the Jogja art academy. GSRB was a revolt against these histories.

But this escape from art history has unintended costs. In a recent essay, Supangkat puts the origin of GSRB in the context of Pop Art Happenings in the US, the practices of Joseph Beuys, as well as certain Southeast Asian conceptual movements. (Supangkat 2010) But there are other histories which are silenced, namely an entire tradition of art and activism in Indonesia, broadly called known as ‘*kerakyatan*’ or people’s art which was practiced extensively by LEKRA, the cultural affiliate of the Indonesian communist party in the Fifties and Sixties. Certainly, we need to acknowledge *kerakyatan* as an influence of GSRB, which arose together with a student movement against New Order repression. While Supangkat disagrees, other members of GSRB did not like Harsono who wrote about the theme of *kerakyatan* in his thesis in the nineties creating a genealogy encompassing GSRB. A more radical movement PIPA, affiliated with GSRB, pushed a more activist and confrontational practice in the late Seventies. But Supangkat chooses to ignore this local art history in favor of the meta-historical proclamations of Belting and global art. Amnesia is not confined to the ‘here and now’ party crew.

GSRB disbanded in 1979, but the movement did not die. In the Eighties, a core revolving around Harsono and Bonyong Munni Ardhie refined their art practices in a movement known as Process 85. Using mainly installation practices, they developed a critique of the neo-liberal economic development of Suharto with the mass asymmetries of wealth and power. Beyond the specific social critiques, Process 85 was characterized by a self-critical methodology. These intense research oriented practices included working with non-government organizations (NGOs) to understand the costs of unfettered economic development. Whereas the earlier GSRB work had an improvisational feel to it-- the critique against power stemmed from an instinctual revulsion; Process 85 was more systematic and sociological. In 1987 GSRB was re-formed for the *Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi* or the ‘fantasy-world shopping center’ show.



JIM SUPANGKAT
Kamar Ibu dan Anak
(Bedroom of a Woman and Her Child)
Mixed media installation
(wooden furniture)
1975
(reconstruction 2006, 2011)



GERAKAN SENI RUPA BARU
Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi
Exhibition Catalogue
1987

Pasaraya was an ambitious undertaking by any standards. First, it was a collective art work authored by more than ten artists, sociologists, and art historians. In contrast, the Seventies GSRB shows were collections of individual art works by individuals affiliated with the movement. Secondly, *Pasaraya* sought to deconstruct the modern consumer economy engulfing Indonesia. Its stars were Philip Morris cigarettes, comic books, rock and roll music, advertisements, stickers, and consumer goods. To put it in Frankfurt School terms, the GSRB were taking on the culture industry of advance capitalism.

Pasaraya was seminal in creating an Indonesian visual language which unabashedly engages with urban modernity. They took the language of the street, be it in the form of T-shirts, stickers, movie posters, and advertisements. The GSRB aesthetic strategy was very different from a later more culture-centric one, i.e., centered on Javanese identity, seen in the global biennale circuit in the Nineties. This identity-based aesthetics is exemplified by Heri Dono, who is the most heavily exhibited Indonesian on the global biennale circuit. Dono incorporates elements of tradition, usually in the form of wayang puppetry, mixed with contemporary practices like installation or performance. Other artists associated with this aesthetic include Nindityo Adipurnomo, Arahmaiani, and Krisna Murti.

These contrasting aesthetic strategies are captured in the ZKM exhibition. While Jompot works from Javanese cultural identity, the works of Eko Nugroho, normally described as comics oriented, has a lineage back to the deconstruction of urban imagery as practiced in *Pasaraya* of 1987. Eko looms large in the ZKM show, with his site-specific wall paintings taking up 3 floors of the massive exhibition hall. His drawings also drive the ZKM commercial strategy, with T-shirts and sling bags adorned with his images being sold with much success. This same tension between a critical urban engagement and commercial temptation was already discussed in 1987. GSRB took an ironic and critical view towards the culture industry, be it mocking advertising slogans or parodying consumer products. But there is something very seductive and powerful about these goods. How could they resist? In the words of their manifesto, they had to take a methodological research oriented process to create this distance. But what happens if this process fails?



EKO NUGROHO
ALIEN NATION
Wall painting
Dimensions variable
2011
Courtesy of the artist
Produced in Cooperation with
ZKM | Center for Art and Media,
artist-in-residence program
of the exhibition The Global
Contemporary (2011)

The answer can be seen in the London exhibition *Indonesian Eye: Fantasies and Realities* organized by the Saatchi Gallery also in 2011. Expectations of this show were high among the Indonesian artistic elite, with the seductive promise of finding new markets, outside the usual domestic plutocrats. Alas, the show was a mixed bag in delivery, perhaps emblematic in that the massive glossy catalogue which quickly fell to pieces. Of course, it took an outsider such an international website to articulate the obvious, with the normally bland Art Info reviewing the show as ‘kitschy.’

The problem of kitsch is not new. In the late Nineties, this problem was tackled in the seminal *AWAS!* exhibition, whose significance has been alluded to several times earlier in this essay. A quick recap of the historical context of *AWAS!* is in order. GSRB broke up finally post *Pasaraya*. Supangkat migrated to curatorial fame with the early biennale circuit, Harsono builds a powerful solo practice, and the rest disappeared into the obscurity. By the early nineties, a wave of new student activism was growing across Indonesia, culminating in the massive protests which, in 1997, brought down Suharto and the New Order regime. In simple terms, Indonesia had its Tahir Square almost two decades ago. Artists distinguished themselves in this activism, with many powerful art pieces critiquing the abuses and the ideology of the New Order. This engagement was expressed in various events including the 1992 *Jogja Binal*, the Cemeti *Slot in the Box* show in 1997, and the grassroots efforts in Jogjakarta. *AWAS!* was the art international art exhibition, which was supposed to document the triumph of activist art. But *AWAS!* was a troubled event. It was marred by conflicts

between the various artists, notably the leftist cooperative Taring Padi who were antagonistic towards contemporary art which included the rest of the artists. The local organizers, the curators affiliated with Cemeti, were also antagonized by the high handedness of their Australian sponsors, resulting in 2 different catalogues being produced. But all this ill-will suggested a deeper unease, a doubt about the relevance of the GSRB visual aesthetic amidst the new democracy.

An essay by Laine Berman called “The Art of Street Politics in Indonesia” attacked this problem directly. Beginning with the premise that both art and the state sought to capture the allegiances of the ‘*rakyat*’ or people, she documents how state ideology in Indonesia sought to control the people and contrasted this with how artists sought to liberate by giving them a voice. As I have argued previously, *kerakyatan* is a constant theme in Indonesian art history and its marginalization by the global art vanguard is problematic. In the *reformasi* period, activist artists sought to use a street-driven language, embracing “the emblems of the streets: poster art, comics, installations, graffiti, street theater, stickers, and T shirts, which are either incorporated into their work or become the end product.” (Berman 1999, 75) In short, the GSRB visual language of *Pasaraya* becomes explicitly political in the new democracy. But there is a problem. Berman argues:

“...the conceptualization of national and local problems through objects which are now taking on the characteristics of pop art or localized kitsch. 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 of an extremely narrow understanding of the words most often used: freedom and equality. There is, he claims, an abusive visual hegemony among artists which has weakened the power of words and images. As a result, the previously marginal has become the mainstream.”

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Berman’s diagnosis of Indonesian kitsch is powerful. The problem is not just the overuse of low art or popular culture per se. Rather, it is their inability to connect with larger social realities despite best efforts. This dynamic is driven by a form of art historical amnesia. This narrow understanding, in Moelyono’s words, could stem from a lack of political consciousness. However, the cause be even simpler, artists repeat images in an uncritical fashion because they do not have an art historical perspective, in the case of Indonesia the entire *kerakyatan* tradition. The consequence of which is a type of political kitsch, which unfortunately we continue to see these days in the fetishism of urban culture or casual ruminations on Islam and gender: the proliferation of the image of the tudung. They have all been seen before, as in *Pasaraya*. Later in her essay, Berman notes that this type of kitsch becomes an easy commodity for the global art markets. As noted in our discussion of Paris and ZKM, easy globalization these days does not required depoliticized art per se, in fact, polemics and controversies add to the color. Rather, the global needs to operate from a field where a local art history or the deeper meanings is void. Kitsch is one of the strategies of this operation.

Berman’s critique gets physically represented in the ZKM piece *Souvenirs from the Third World* (1997 – 1999) by Agung Kurniawan, consisting of a series of food carts normally used by food vendors in the informal sector. These carts are graced by sculptures, representing various characters of the *reformasi* era including corrupt politicians, murderous military thugs, and the international curator. The ZKM show is missing the cart with the



AGUNG KURNIAWAN
Souvenirs of the Third World
 Objects of fiberglass, wood,
 aluminium
 1997 — 1999

curator figure, bedecked in a Superman suit and sprouting a Pinocchio nose. In interviews, Agung describes the work as a critique of the commoditization of art, related to the demand for activist art after the fall of Suharto. Both Berman's essay and Agung's art work are ripostes to this commoditization.

In ZKM, *Souvenirs* is put in a section called 'Life Worlds and Image Worlds', described in the catalogue as the reaction of artists to omnipresent image-worlds created by mass media, i.e., film spectacles or by implication the global art market. Implicit in this framing is that *Life Worlds* tries to escape this commoditization. For me, the power of *Souvenirs* also lies in the unique biography of Agung. He is an enigmatic figure in Indonesian art history, only recently being rehabilitated by the art market in its search for product. While lauded as the best draughtsman in the country, his cerebral art works, as well as his prickly disdain for the art scene, has made him a problematic artist for galleries. After *AWAS!*, and depressed by the commoditization of art, he stopped his art practice and played video games. He returned several years later with intensely homo-erotic pieces attempting to exorcise internal repressions. But his search for *Life Worlds* took the form of creating alternative social institutions. In the 2000s, he built Kedai Kebun Forum, a space for the alternative arts in Jogja, and was one of the founders of the Indonesian Visual Art Archive, which documents contemporary art practices in the country. Both these spaces continue to flourish. They fill the institutional vacuum of museums, preserving memory amidst the amnesia.

Agung also insists that these life world projects are linked with local art history. In a recent paper, he describes GSRB as a failure at some level, having failed to bring down the old art establishment and indirectly, the Suharto regime. (Kurniawan 2011) But he acknowledges their impact through events like the 1992 *Jogja Binal* where younger artists and activists took the avant-garde practices of GSRB global art into the larger public stage, in this case, the streets of Jogja. Agung was one of the key student organizers of that event. While acknowledging the power of their aesthetics, he also indicts their failure to build viable alternative institutions. For him, GSRB remained at the level of a gang. These gangs usually implode due to personalities unless they get institutionalized. But what distinguishes a viable alternative institution? At some level, Jogja is swarming with them, as Le Sourd noted.

A little known show in Jogja this summer has some intriguing answers. In August, Cemeti hosted a show called *The Disintegrating Faces of the Children of the Dam* by the Eighties artist Moelyono, the same individual quoted by Berman. As a young artist, Moelyono was the youngest member of PIPA and he later was part of Process 85. Besides his indirect GSRB lineage, his significance lies in a very radical art practice called conscientization. Like many other progressive third world intellectuals working in the nineties, Moelyono was influenced by the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who argued for a type of political practice built on raising the consciousness of the oppressed classes. Moelyono worked with displaced farmers and fishermen. In the Wonorejo Dam project first developed in the Nineties, he sought to educate East Javanese farmers about the consequences of a new dam on their economics and cultural livelihood. His Nineties work was documented through the Australian ARX (Artists Regional Exchange) and the Asia Pacific Triennial. Then Moelyono faded from the international exhibition circuit.

The 2011 Cemeti show is vital for it showed the resilience of Moelyono's practice. Even after twenty years, the various art educational centers, established by Moelyono, for conscientization continue, despite the relative decline of the NGO sector in Indonesia. Part of the rationale of the Cemeti show and the various galleries follow-up was to sell the paintings of the children of Wonorejo to fund these projects. While the paintings are unexceptional, several abstract installations in the show are provocative. In contrast to the highly finished



MOELYONO
Dancing on Crack Land
 Acrylic on canvas
 2011

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object installations of S Teddy D, who was having a retrospective in Jogja at the same time, Moelyono uses a strategy of dematerialization. For him, this dematerialization was particularly relevant for the current conditions of farmers. In one piece, he displays seeds and vials of blood, signifying how the material means of production for farmers are dematerialized. In the case of seeds, the use of GMO agriculture meant farmers did not own seeds, which they had bought from multinational seed companies. Rather they only had the right to use them for a limited number of harvests. In the case of the vials of blood, Moelyono comments that the dispossession of rural lands due to industrialization meant that the concept of farmer only exists by virtue of their blood, signifying lineage and history. The exhibition *Children of the Dam* derives a lot of its power from a dialogue with the earlier work in the Nineties, employing a critical discourse that Enin laments is lacking in the work of most Indonesian artists.

The work and the lives of Agung and Moelyono point us to an alternative life world, which can be juxtaposed against the general amnesia afflicting the Indonesian contemporary. Both of them refuse to forget, a longer richer art history that includes the tradition of *kerakyatan*. They incorporate into sustainable alternative institutions that transcend amnesia. But what is the value of an art historical perspective on our understanding of Indonesian art per se? I would argue that it creates depth. The concept of standards has an instinctively hierarchal ring to it, but it is not innately elitist. It allows us to judge artworks within a larger, historical local tradition; to discern the ephemeral and the kitsch from a powerful living history. Indonesian art had its Utopian ambitions, be it Persagi, LEKRA, and the activism of the Nineties. Regardless of their failures, they set a standard that must neither be forgotten and to which all material must be judged against. Otherwise, all becomes kitsch and cannon fodder for the global art markets.

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