

# Contemporary Worlds and The Great Debate

One afternoon in mid-2013, I found myself wandering around a fairground in Bandung, Indonesia. The ground was dusty and littered with cast-off packaging, occasional muddy patches were bridged with wooden pallets cracking under the weight of pedestrian traffic. As I followed artist Tisna Sanjaya through the fair's alleyways, the screams of exhilarated children rose above the accompaniment of chugging motors, the air heavy with the smell of diesel, kerosene and deep fried food. Tisna Sanjaya spread his sketches and annotated photographs on a wooden bench and pointed to a Ferris wheel nearby, explaining his plans to turn the ride into a performative artwork for an upcoming international biennial. We took a ride on the wheel as the sun began to set, and then continued to wander the fairground, with the artist stopping regularly to speak to ride-owners and operators, and to look back at his plans while observing the different swinging, turning and spinning machines. The brightly coloured, full-size swinging ship, known in Indonesia as a *kora-kora* after Moluccan sea vessels, caught his attention, and he began a discussion with the two young men operating the swing. Later that year I witnessed his performative installation, *Doa Kora-Kora (Boat Prayer)* (2013) make its debut at the Biennale Jogja XII, *Not a Dead End* with the artist taking up position at one end of the vessel and an Islamic cleric seated at the other. This was no prettified replica, but rather an original fairground ride, with a rusty steel frame and brilliant colours carrying a boat assembled from welded panels painted to resemble a cartoon-style wooden boat. On the ground in front a traditional central-Javanese seated orchestra and dancers performed, while on the boat the artist and the cleric discussed the relationship between Islam, art, beauty and aesthetics. I marvelled; this kind of artwork, so precariously balanced and toxically-fuelled could never be shown in risk-averse, health-and-safety obsessed Australia.

I was right, of course, but I was also wrong. In 2019, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) commissioned what might best be described as an homage to *Doa Kora-Kora*, resulting in the work *Seni penjernih dialog (Art as purifying dialogue)* (2019). This *kora-kora*, unsurprisingly, did not swing, but was firmly anchored on a wooden platform. It also appeared to hang from a large A-frame, as though if the circumstances warranted it might well begin to move. The aesthetics were also tailored (tamed, even) somewhat to the environment it found itself in; raw timber replaced the colourfully painted metal panels of the original. But the references to Javanese culture remained, with a *gamelan* orchestra tucked into a corner, and *wayang golek* (carved wooden rod puppets), also anomalously unpainted, perched starboard and port. Inside the boat a large flat-screen television, held in a wooden frame to match its rustic surrounds, presented videos of the original *Doa Kora-Kora* in action, and various performances and video works from the artist's three decade long career. In an interview with Indonesian journalists, Sanjaya explained that although the form had altered, this in itself became an opportunity for dialogue between the artwork and his own understanding of the technical limitations of the (museum) space. In this we might read that there are also limitations in the cultural space into which Sanjaya's work had been inserted.



This essay aims to explore the kinds of limitations and possibilities that an exhibition like *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*<sup>1</sup> presents, by examining the selected works and their 'performance' in the museum environment, and the context from which they emerge. How are they received, what is translated, what is lost in translation? This was, as NGA director Nick Mitzevich proclaimed in his opening speech, an "ambitious" exhibition. But in further describing it as "broad and representative" he may have raised the spectre of a kind of exemplar that the inter-institutional curatorial team (of which I was a satellite member) had attempted to wrestle the exhibition away from.<sup>2</sup> Modern Indonesian art workers have since the form's earliest manifestations resisted, deliberated, deified and despoiled the very notion of a representative art of Indonesia. Perhaps, paradoxically, the ongoing "great debate" over what constitutes Indonesian art is what best represents contemporary art in Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

#### CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA OR CONTEMPORARY ART?

There is a complex nub in this problem of representation, particularly when applied to contemporary art. This nub resides in the nature of contemporary art itself, in particular the drive for it to respond to its own times. For more than the twenty year period over which this exhibition casts its range, Indonesian society, culture and politics have been continuously agitated, encompassing the *Reformasi* era immediately after the fall of the thirty-two year authoritarian reign of President Suharto, and the subsequent decades which revealed the extent of his New Order's repressive mechanisms. The consequences of the release of this authoritarian pressure played out in sometimes unpredictable

ways, and the results, direct and indirect, have continued to confound. The lifting of restrictions on religious expression made way for an often oppressively dominant Islamic culture, which is now expressed in fields as diverse as women's fashion, through to the interpretation of blasphemy laws. An increased collective consciousness of human rights and gender issues has brought many Indonesians 'out of the closet' but the increased visibility of co-habitation practices tacitly long accepted prompted a violent backlash from both community and legislation. This has also been aided by the decentralisation of a system that had vested all power in the Java-centred government, which while allowing indigenous groups to regain control over their destinies, also opened up space for peripheral corruption, collusion and exclusion of minorities. Indonesian contemporary artists (and many visiting artists) respond to these events sometimes in prescient fashion, and sometimes with the same bewildered and eclipsed reactivity as most of the population.

Eko Nugroho is an excellent example of an artist whose work has shifted from resistance to New Order restrictions on freedom of speech, to expressions of disquiet with the emergence of a cacophony of unfiltered voices and opinions articulated in the public space. His *Daging Tumbuh* brand began as a photocopied comic, distributed hand-to-hand from its establishment in 2000, as the excited flush of hard-won democracy swept young Indonesian artists into celebration. His artworks in *Contemporary Worlds*, however, are a more cynical reflection on the side-effects of democracy and the political milieu that is now filled with ever-present campaigning, demonstrations, moralistic overtones and an excess of contesting parties.<sup>4</sup> Nugroho's demonstration banners, loudly declaring in white on black "DEMOKRASI" and "NATIONALISME", stand to attention under an illuminated sign that more quietly states, "COLLOSAL TRAP". In an irony perhaps missed by many, the banners were created using the *batik* process, often associated with Indonesian-ness both inside and outside Indonesia, but in fact a largely Javanese tradition that is also claimed by Malaysia and practiced widely in Africa.

While Nugroho's politically declarative works demonstrate his transformation to pessimism since the heady days of democratic reform, senior artists like FX Harsono, who had worked alongside activists and NGOs to undermine the New Order, initially found themselves in a creative vacuum following Suharto's fall.<sup>5</sup> Harsono's *Gazing on Collective Memory* (2016), at the exhibition entrance, continues his shift in focus which began with a re-evaluation of his practice's role in telling stories of Indonesia. Harsono's own declaration of democracy, *Voice Without Voice/Sign*, (1993-94), spelled out *demokrasi* in sign language, with photographic silkscreens of hand signs applied to canvas. Harsono is now concerned with those unheard voices from Suharto's New Order and many other periods of Indonesian history. Chinese-Indonesians like Harsono have historically suffered the brunt of violence and marginalisation in Indonesia in spite of their centuries-long presence in the archipelago. *Gazing on Collective Memory's* nostalgic black and white images, and Chinese and Peranakan (Chinese-Malay) artefacts illuminated by red electric candles might not so readily alert the visitor to the recent backlash against Christian, Chinese-descent former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. The unfortunate events that saw 'BTP', or Ahok (his Hakka nickname) jailed for two years on blasphemy charges alarmed many Chinese-descent Indonesians, who have in recent years been able to freely practice their culture in the public realm. Both Nugroho's and Harsono's artworks are such that the average visitor, or those well versed in Indonesian politics and culture, might not possibly be able to discern their multiple layers. What, if anything, should the museum visitor be learning about Indonesia from an exhibition of contemporary art? What should they learn from contemporary art in general?

PEDAGOGY, COMMUNITY, RESEARCH, MATERIALITY: THE ART MAKING PROJECT

While contemporary artists' commitment to their own learning, research and expressive methodologies can sometimes be obscured by the sheer spectacle of exhibitions in national institutions and the international biennale circuit, these are no more than the manifestations that come into the mainstream of public discourse. Behind and beyond these activities, ecologies of practice cultivate the production of contemporary artworks that will, for the most part, never be seen on the global stage. When we examine that stage, we see artworks that are developed 'behind the scenes' in an environment that we may never encounter. Artist collectives provide intellectually and experimentally creative environments from which, on occasion, an art 'star' might arise. Artist-run initiatives create exhibition opportunities for emerging and established artists, to critique each other's artwork, and potentially push theoretical and real boundaries. Research-based projects comb archives and reveal histories never before acknowledged; community art projects are often intended only for the benefit of the community involved and some have no more than pedestrian documentation, and perhaps a budget acquittal to represent what they have, or have not achieved. This is the unglamorous side of contemporary art, but it is the larger part of that world and the part where the work is done. When we view the global stage, we may have the opportunity to look beyond the oversized prints, projected videos, repurposed images, objects and ideas and discover where they came from. In Indonesia, the historical context of society, politics and art has nurtured particular forms of art, the evidence of which has carried through—consciously or otherwise—to those works presented in *Contemporary Worlds*.

The educational potential of art did not go unnoticed by Indonesian artists, their artist collectives focused on sharing both skills and ideology, and many of their members were students and/or teachers who played active roles in the independence movement in the early twentieth century. Over subsequent decades art was frequently employed through both formalised policies of bodies like the Institute for People's Culture (*Lekra*) in the 1950s and 1960s, and the experimental methodologies of individual artists, as in Moelyono's "conscientisation art" which he first began to formulate in the late 1980s. In the 1970s Moelyono was, along with FX Harsono, part of a cohort of artists who were deeply engaged with then emerging ideas around contemporary forms, such as installation, kinetic, immersive and participatory art—these artists sought to depart high and low art, and make their work accessible to ordinary Indonesians. The New Art Movement's boundary-pushing exhibitions from the mid-1970s and into the 1980s were followed by the *Proses 85* exhibition, in which several artists, including Harsono and Moelyono, embedded themselves within a local environmental NGO, witnessing such social issues as mercury poisoning in Jakarta Bay, rampant plastic waste dumping, and the side effects of mass development projects. Moelyono's work appeared in the 3rd Asia-Pacific Triennial but fell short of his original concept, and he has not gained the international recognition of many of his contemporaries. Art historian Susan Ingham speculates that Moelyono's work is difficult to translate into an international exhibition context, although "the artist himself says he does not find the transition from village to gallery difficult. His real work, he says, is in the village, that is his praxis or action, and the work in gallery is for reflection."<sup>6</sup>

Resonances of the kinds of pedagogical intent Moelyono continues to champion are evident in *Contemporary Worlds*. In Tisna Sanjaya's *Seni penjernih dialog (Art as purifying dialogue)* this was made explicit through the inscription of the words *etik*, *pedagogik* and *estetik* on the wooden platform supporting the boat, and through the dialogical lectures with community and intellectual leaders performed there on the opening weekend. Yet it also appears more subtly in Yudha 'Fehung'

Kusuma Putera's gentle participatory photographic project *Past, present and future come together* (2017), which presents members of unconventionally formed families or households into a 'single body' enveloped with found fabric, revealing a single head. With participation remaining one of the driving factors for experimental art in Indonesia, institutions should recognise the importance of supporting audience access to works in the way the artists envisage, even though this diverges from the static displays museums traditionally construct. In Indonesia, with museum culture relatively nascent and free from the burden of 'how it should be done', museums and galleries are responsive to this, and to some extent are part of a context of production that encourages experiments in participatory and immersive art.<sup>7</sup>

Tita Salina's *1001st island—the most sustainable island in Archipelago* (2015) embraces the kind of deep research that developed from earlier forms promulgated by *Lekra's* imperative to "go down below" into the lives of the poor and marginalised.<sup>8</sup> Emerging from a separate collaborative project that has involved annually traversing and mapping the northern coast of Jakarta, Salina developed a floating island created from plastic rubbish retrieved with the local fishing community. An impeccably produced video documents the project from the collection of the waste through to her performative invocation of its island status, marooned between the natural Thousand Islands archipelago (north of Jakarta) and the man-made islands of Jakarta's Garuda reclamation/sea-wall project. The installation of this work drew a constant stream of contemplative viewers, demonstrating how careful crafting of the "reflections" Moelyono referred to, in collaboration with exhibition designers, can draw an audience into greater communion with a works' intention.

The universality of the themes in Yudha 'Fehung' Kusuma Putera's and Tita Salina's works overcome any distance that may have emerged for audiences encountering Akiq AW's light-hearted revision of the jingles and decorative cement reliefs associated with the New Order's "two children are enough" campaigns (also accompanied by sanctions enshrined in educational and welfare policy). For the many Indonesian and 'Indonesianist' viewers, such references might have been obvious; for others, recourse to wall texts and the catalogue was probably required, or else contentment with the jaunty images and videos. In other works, such as Entang Wiharso's *Temple of Hope: Door to Nirvana* (2018-19) a sense of exotic spectacle, an unknowability, may have been the most attractive aspect of this monumental steel construction with its lace-like patterns and atmospheric shadows. But upon closer inspection, what then of the comic book imagery, and quotes from popular culture? Does the viewer understand this work as a "meditation on impact of intolerance towards difference" as described in the exhibition catalogue?<sup>9</sup>

The "great debate" of Indonesian art has continued into the present day and into *Contemporary Worlds*, albeit in a different form. The notion of Indonesian art as inherently political is one that collaborating Indonesian curator Enin Supriyanto articulates in his catalogue essay, in reference also to the history of exhibitions of Indonesian contemporary art in Australia, and throughout the world. Supriyanto points, as he has done on a number of occasions, to the work of the Jendela Art Group, as evidence of the invalidity of the political assumptions around contemporary art in Indonesia. Handiwirman Saputra's sculptural exploration of the materiality of detritus, the Tromarama collective's videos infused with temporal tension and disrupted expectations, Albert Yonathan's massive three-dimensional mandala and Faisal Habibie's floating negative metal shapes left behind by industrial processes are, for Enin, "rebellious against the socio-political 'frame'" imposed on Indonesian art by forces inside and outside the nation. The artists, it seems, regard these issues "not important enough to be part of their work."<sup>10</sup> But is this anti-heteronomous





position as strident as Enin suggests? Tromorama's videos feature cleverly constructed dissolutions of the boundaries of image and effect—a standing screen featuring a fan blowing noisily points at a video projection of a tea towel ruffled by the breeze; a ball rolls along a surface on one screen before dropping into the next in a different colour, or a different scene or object entirely. Supriyanto contends Tromorama is addressing issues around the mediated image and our relationship with them through the Internet; surely this is one of the most socio-politically charged issues of our time.

Alia Swastika (one of four Indonesian collaborating curators) also presents an alternative vision of the political in her essay on the body and women artists, when she reflects on the work of artists emerging in the years following the fall of Suharto in 1998, which frequently invoked personal narratives to reveal the effects of political decisions. These tactics were necessary to allow them to develop from older notions of what politics concerns, "Issues such as identity, sexuality, women's standpoints on politics and intimacy, spirituality and environmentalism were less noticeable during the New Order, as politics was always discussed with a capital P, and referred to notions of state and power."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this too is the socio-political frame that Enin Supriyanto sees post-*Reformasi* artists rebelling from, capital P politics rather than the stuff of interaction with the body politic.

#### UNDERSTANDING 'INDONESIA' THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART

The media reception to *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*, though largely positive, was also hugely divergent in interpretation. Australian art historian Sasha Grishin reverted to a familiar observation of Indonesian contemporary art as having been influenced by the "common parlance of biennale art," but tempered this with the contention that the bright colours and (presumably) exotic

soundscapes identified a “national characteristic—their Indonesian DNA.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Australian art critic John Macdonald was impressed by what he sensed as a “defiant rejection of nationalistic rhetoric” which, he seemed to suggest, is indicative of a similar sentiment among the Indonesian population.<sup>13</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth; contemporary artists in Indonesia have perhaps even less in common with the broader, highly nationalistic Indonesian citizenry than compared with their Australian counterparts. Art critic Alison Carroll perceived a lack of exposure of Indonesian art in Australia, stating that more space is needed to “to find the sense of theatre, of the magic lurking in shadows, of the mischief and moral purity of the gods, of the elegance of line and style of a culture trained to see the angle of an arm or the bend of the knee as highly pondered action.”<sup>14</sup>

What such commentary had in common appeared to be an interpretation laden with nostalgia for a notion of Indonesia as something Other—to varying degrees, impressed by its aesthetic and experimental qualities, they have perceived *Contemporary Worlds* as representative of an imaginary Indonesian culture, one which is essentialised, unified and simple; knowable, digestible. These familiar tropes fail to represent urban Indonesians who are more likely to recognise the angle of an arm as indicating a selfie or a we-fie; nor do they represent those Indonesians whose performative and visual traditions have only recently begun to attract recognition outside anthropological circles and which are far often from elegantly ponderous. Yet many of the works in *Contemporary Worlds* engage with the ways in which culture and intellectual debate manifests in contemporary Indonesia—encouraging, even demanding a we-fie; they invite interaction with screens, quote comics, discuss postcolonial discourse, and reflect on religion and history in a nuanced, inquisitive way.

That Indonesia is not a singular culture has been the basis of the “great debate” that continues today, and this diversity remains the source of both great tension and enormous pride in Indonesia (“unity in diversity” being the nation’s motto). But the dominance of a Javanese centre in contemporary art is one of the aspects the NGA’s curators contended with in their early considerations, including the Indonesian collaborating curators through their respective practices in Indonesia. As NGA Director Mitzevich specified in his catalogue foreword, the majority of the works were drawn from “Bali and Java’s key artistic centres of Bandung, Yogyakarta and Jakarta.” With Ubud missing, the inclusion of IGAK Murniasih and I Made Wiguna Valasara placed it firmly in this nexus. Handiwirman Saputra and his compatriots in the Jendela Art Group are from the Minangkabau ethnic group in West Sumatra but have taken up that culture’s migratory tradition of *merantau* and moved permanently to Yogyakarta, along with arts students from around the archipelago. Just four of the twenty-six artists were born outside Java or Bali, and while some live and work away from those islands, they are based in Germany, Japan or the USA when not in Indonesia. While it is true that over half of Indonesia’s population lives on Java, on the global stage there remains a disproportionate under-representation of artists who work on other islands. This fact represents what is required of curators from such institutions when aspiring to ‘discover’ Indonesia and its contemporary art.

Collaborating curator Alia Swastika is involved in one such project (of discovery) in her role as Director of the Yogyakarta Biennale Foundation, which recently held the Biennale Jogja XV, the fifth in a series specifically themed around locations on the equator. For the 2019 iteration, *Indonesia meets Southeast Asia*, the theme of the periphery prompted the curators to arrange projects and residencies specifically away from Java and Bali, to encourage artists to travel further into the archipelago. Artists from West Sulawesi, Banda Aceh, Makassar, West Kalimantan and Madura were

also included. Another of the curatorial team, Grace Samboh, is instigating research into tertiary visual art education across the Indonesian archipelago. When these projects have percolated through to the foundational layers of contemporary art in Indonesia, the local biennials, artist-run-initiatives, community projects, collectives and research projects, perhaps the work produced by their many practitioners who are not based on Java and Bali might adorn the institutions of the global stage. Until then, most of us will have to be content with exhibitions that bring us into close contact with the issues that preoccupy the majority of (non-peripheral) contemporary artists in Indonesia: unsurprisingly, not far removed from the issues that preoccupy global contemporary art elsewhere – the failure of democracy to provide a voice for minorities, the amelioration of the rapid destruction of our shared earth, the deconstruction of structural inequities, and sustaining our cultural constructs.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*, National Gallery of Australia, 21 June–27 October, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Nick Mitzevich was quoted by Erin Cross, 'New Exhibition Highlights Modern Indonesia', *The Canberra Times*, 22 June 2019. The reference to the inter-institutional curatorial team appeared in the Director's Foreword to the catalogue, p.10

<sup>3</sup> The term "The Great Debate" was first used by Claire Holt in her 1967 study of modern art in Indonesia, to refer to what is known in Indonesia as the Cultural Polemic of 1935. Through published forums, writer and intellectual Takdir Alisjahbana argued that Indonesians should seek equality by cultivating Western individualism and materialism, while the poet Sanoesi Pane urged a syncretic approach based on his perceived superiority of the East. Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967, pp. 211-254

<sup>4</sup> Fifteen parties contested the 2019 general election, down from 2009 when thirty-eight parties registered, slightly up on the last election in 2014 when twelve parties were officially accepted. Vikram Nehru and Nadia Bulkin, 'How Indonesia's 2014 Elections Will Work', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. For more on the evolution of the Indonesian party political system see Paige Johnson Tan, 'Reining in the Reign of the Parties: Political Parties in Contemporary Indonesia', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 20, 2012, no. 2

<sup>5</sup> This period was examined in the exhibition and publication *15 Years Cemeti Art House: Exploring Vacuum*, Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art House, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Susan Ingham, 'Powerlines: Alternative Art and Infrastructure in Indonesia in the 1990s', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007, p. 248 (unpublished)

<sup>7</sup> I explored this in detail in my PhD thesis, Ellen Kent, 'Entanglement: Individual and Participatory Art Practice in Indonesia', Australian National University, 2016 (unpublished)

<sup>8</sup> Antariksa, *Tuan Tanah Kawin Muda: Hubungan Seni Rupa-Lekra, 1950-1965*, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Beatrice Thompson, 'Entang Wiharso', in Jaklyn Babington and Carol Cains eds, *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia* (exhib. cat.), National Gallery of Australia, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Enin Supriyanto, 'A sight for sore eyes: after the riots and commotions', *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*, p. 34

<sup>11</sup> Alia Swastika, 'The Private and public body in the works of Indonesian women artists', *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*, pp. 43-52

<sup>12</sup> Sasha Grishin, 'Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is a milestone exhibition for Indonesian artists', *The Canberra Times*, 27 June 2019; <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6242157/a-milestone-for-indonesia-and-the-nga/>; accessed 4 November 2019

<sup>13</sup> Alison Carroll, 'Indonesian art is fresh, energetic and lively. Why do we not see more of it?', *The Conversation*, 9 July, 2019; <http://theconversation.com/indonesian-art-is-fresh-energetic-and-lively-why-do-we-not-see-more-of-it-119747>; accessed 4 November 2019

<sup>14</sup> John MacDonald, 'Indonesia: Contemporary Worlds', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 July 2019