

From artists' initiatives to market-oriented and collector's driven art practices:

Notes on the modes of organisation of the Indonesian arts scene

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In order to give an introduction on Indonesian contemporary art to an international audience, it is helpful to understand how the arts scene has been shaped in the last two decades. Concentrated mainly in Java's island - in the cities of Jakarta, Yogyakarta and Bandung – and Bali, and organised by private initiatives, the arts scene in Indonesia has been changing its modes of organisation, production and distribution from artist-run spaces to a more market-oriented art practice.

Organised by communities of artists that share common interests, artist-run spaces are a response to the lack of public infrastructure in the arts field in Indonesia. Until now, these non-profit initiatives establish networks of collaboration, promote art discourse and serve as gathering places where people get the latest news about the local and international art scene. Privately run and with no support from the government, these groups evolved in a sort of organic way to shape the arts scene, based mostly on artist's interests and connected to issues in society. During the nineties, artist initiatives such as Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, contributed to the internationalisation of Indonesian contemporary art. Established in 1988 by the artist couple Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo, the space combines exhibitions, arts production with art discourses and international residency programmes.

Cemeti Art House promoted a number of artists that now gain international recognition. An example is the career of the artist Eko Nugroho, who started as a street artist and whose work has been widely exhibited overseas. His latest solo exhibition, *Témoin Hybride*, opened at the Musée d' Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in January this year. Eko's works are based on graffiti and popular culture. With a touch of humour and some Javanese elements, the artist recreates imaginary figures and animated worlds in a number of media, such as embroideries, sculptures, murals, videos, comic books and *wayang* (shadow) puppets. His playful works depict the contradictions of global culture.

During the nineties, countries like Australia and Japan played major roles in the promotion of Indonesian contemporary in the Asia Pacific region. The Asia Pacific Triennial (since 1993 until now), organised by Queensland Art Gallery, and the exhibitions at Fukuoka Art Museum and Japan

Foundation are some examples of institutions dedicated to explore contemporary art in the region. This situation derived from the Indonesian foreign affairs relations with both countries at that time. It is remarkably to say that the selection of artists had certain autonomy from the government, allowing the presence of critical works that most likely would not be suitable for the Indonesian public administration.

The generation of the nineties was characterised by addressing local circumstances in a critical way. Artists such as Agus Suwage, Heri Dono, Eddie Hara, Arahmaiani, Mella Jaarsma, FX Harsono, Agung Kurniawan, Krisna Murti, Tisna Sanjaya and Nindityo Adipurnomo opened the path to an international interest in Indonesian contemporary art. Mostly connected to socio-political subject matters and with strong critical works, these artists participated in major international art events, such as the Venice Biennale or the Asia Pacific Triennial, travelling also with group exhibitions overseas, such as *AWAS!* that toured (from 1999-2002) to Japan, Australia, Indonesia and Germany.

An example of critical thoughts and social commitment is the work of FX Harsono. Born in the village of Blitar to Chinese-Indonesian parents, he has been mapping the history of Chinese-Indonesian minorities in recent Indonesian history. Going back to his family origins, the artist reflects on political issues and abuses against Chinese-Indonesian. His latest body of work is about learning how to write his Chinese name. In fact, during the New Order (1965-1998), Suharto dictated a series of laws that restricted the practice of Chinese customs and religions solely to private domains. This included that Chinese-Indonesian had to change their names into Indonesian sounding names. His installations and videos show how he develops these subject in order to express cultural discrimination, but also a neglect in Indonesian history, in which some themes in history were simply erased or considered taboo.

In Indonesia, it is quite common that gallerists work with multinational corporations to support their activities. For instance, a number of gallerists run tobacco businesses or cooperate with joint venture companies to organise arts events. Some gallerists even have their own foundations, such as *Langgeng Art Foundation* in Yogyakarta established by Deddy Irianto, or the museum and gallery space *Art:1* of gallerist Martha Gunawan, which inaugurated last October in Jakarta.

It is noteworthy to mention that some established artists also opened their own art spaces, such as *Selasar Sunaryo Art Space*, by Sunaryo in Bandung; or *Sangkring Art Space*, by Putu Sutawijaya in Yogyakarta. Another mode of organisation is that of the collectors. Dr. Oei Hong Djien, a tobacco entrepreneur and an enthusiastic art collector, is the owner of the OHD Museum in the city of

Magelang with an impressive collection of modern and contemporary art, that is free to the public.

In the absence of public funded arts organisations, Indonesian curators work for galleries. In this sense, they are more market-oriented and usually follow and support the commercial intentions of the galleries they work with. There is almost no exhibition without a curator, as the role they play as facilitators of information – whether this is good or not - is highly appreciated. Notable exceptions constitute curators that write scholarly texts fostering art discourses, such as senior curator Hendro Wiyanto, and young curators such as Enin Supriyanto, Agung Hujatnikajennong and Aminuddin TH Siregar.

Commercial galleries are expanding their horizons participating in major Asian art fairs and doing exhibitions mostly in Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. This situation has shaped also the production of artworks. To a certain extent, there are two types of artists, the ones that participate in international biennales or are exhibited in foreign museums, and those who work mostly for a market of hungry collectors, coming mainly from Indonesia, China and Singapore.

Motivated by trends of global consumer culture and a particular lifestyle, young urban elites have been starting consuming art since the 2000s. In this context, commercial galleries have been mushrooming since 2008 in shopping malls, such as Jakarta Art District in Grand Indonesia Mall. And this affects the arts scene, as it is perceived merely as a commodity. Surprisingly enough, there is a growing interest in video and new media arts - a current trend of this decade - as the majority of collectors usually spend their money in paintings.

Thanks to internet and social media, but also to platforms such as Youtube, blogs and other type of virtual networks, the actual generation of artists is more exposed to an international audience and is influenced by global culture. The generation of the 2000s does not have to struggle for spaces to show their works, as there are now a bunch of options on how to promote it, either online or in the growing commercial scene.

However, the art market is changing the attitudes towards the selection of works to be exposed in an international arena. The current decision-makers are not the artists, who in the nineties were shaping the scene according to their needs, but collectors and galleries, who are increasingly deciding the direction of artistic production.

Currently, there is an increasing interest in Indonesian contemporary art all around the globe and not only in the Asia Pacific region. In fact, 2011 has been a good year for the exposure of Indonesian contemporary art in Europe. The exhibitions *Trans-Figurations: Indonesian Mythologies* at Le Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in Paris, *The Indonesian Eye* at Saatchi in London, *Beyond the East* at MACRO in Rome, are some examples of this trend. However, we don't know which direction the Indonesian arts scene is going take, but what is certain is that it is a vibrant arts scene worth to be seen.