The Impossibility of Art History in Indonesia

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Today I want to talk about an aspect of the history of Indonesian art, especially the history of modern art and its relationship to contemporary art. I chose the title, “the Impossibility of Art History in Indonesia” to make it clear there may, or may not, be an art history that can explain progress in a linear fashion from the beginning of modern art until what we now know as postmodern or contemporary art. To know what art looks like in the 21st century, it is important to understand formal developments in art in the previous century, the 20th century.

In order to explain art history, we need to talk about continuity and also discontinuity, and how important continuity for understanding how Indonesian artists have addressed problems in visual art. My title evokes that of Claire Holt’s great book about Indonesian art, which remains the standard work in art discourse. “Continuities and Change” was the subtitle to that book, Art in Indonesia. The immediate question raised by the current situation of contemporary art is whether there really is continuity? In her book, she implies and sometimes directly identifies continuities between ancient or traditional and modern art, but does that still hold? The first two parts of her book deal with ancient art and its continuation into traditional arts as they were found in the twentieth century. But it is also important to note that in the third chapter of the book she talks about modern art as it was when she carried out new fieldwork in the mid-1950s. That chapter is not really integrated with the first two, as if the ‘modern’ represented change more than continuity. She talks about this modern art as “Westernized art” (p.194), implying its separation from tradition. In her historiography, the starting point of the development of Indonesian art is problematic.

A decade after Claire Holt’s book was published, one of the most important exhibitions for defining history of modern Indonesian art was held in Jakarta. This was the “Seabad Seni Rupa Indonesia”, “A Century of Indonesian Fine Art.”, held in 1976 in the building which is now the Jakarta Fine Arts and Ceramics Museum. The exhibition was curated by Kusnadi, Holt’s contemporary, with whom she had met and corresponded in the 1950s and 1960s. Kusnadi and Sudarmaji put together the catalogue. This exhibition brought together artworks in state and private collections, many of which were seen by the public for the first time.

In the narrative embodied in this exhibition, there are two ‘fathers’ of modern Indonesian art, Raden Saleh and Sudjojono. These are the ‘pioneers’ or ‘founders’ of modern Indonesian art, which presents two significant problems: they were born more than a century apart; and there is no evidence of any direct stylistic or formal link between the art of the two. Usually in the process of writing art history, there has to be some kind of progression of stylistic developments taking place, such as between ‘Schools of Art’ or genres; or something that can explain how formal changes occur from classic to modern forms. Between Raden Saleh and Sudjojono, there appear to be only discontinuities, especially because art historians of Indonesia have yet to identify the role of followers of Raden Saleh and their influences before Sudjojono.

It is particularly important that Kusnadi’s version of art history was exhibited in the context of the New Order. During the era of Sukarno, the President had been a major patron of the arts, including of modern artists. Significant works from the Sukarno collection, now the Presidential collection, were included in the exhibition. Under his successor, Soeharto, state patronage of modern art was largely absent. Despite Soeharto’s participation in the opening of the exhibition, he did not pay attention to its art mainly because he did not like modern art. Such indeed did not seem fit in the New Order paradigm to prioritize a rationalized version of tradition, which can be controlled in order to produce a compliant population. The problem with modern art is that it is usually radical, often opposed to political power and social order. This would definitely not have been to Soeharto’s taste. There are other private patrons that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Jakarta but also elsewhere in Indonesia. These included former Foreign Minister and Vice President Adam Malik, many of whose works were donated to the Museum Seni Rupa dan Keramik. Ultimately figures such as Malik were marginalized by Soeharto once he had consolidated power, leaving Sino-Indonesians to dominate private collecting of art.

Another problem for Indonesian art history is the absence of key works from Indonesia, meaning that they were not available to be viewed by the Indonesian public, especially artists. While works by Raden Saleh were included in the 1976 exhibition, his masterpiece, “The Capture of Diponegoro” (1857) was in the Netherlands until it was handed over by the Queen of the Netherlands to Soeharto in 1978. When it was returned to Indonesia, this painting was given to the National Museum. Unfortunately, it was taken over by Soeharto (as a kind of pusaka) and therefore ended up in the State Palace. So, it was not possible for other Indonesian artists to have been influenced by this work. Another of his artworks never viewed by Indonesian audiences is the famous work titled “Between Life and Death” (1848) which is considered also to contain nationalistic values, since it shows the battle between a lion (symbolising the Dutch) and a buffalo (a well-known symbol of the Indonesian people). This work was destroyed in a fire in the Paris Exposition of 1931. There are still artworks by Raden Saleh which are currently stored in the Netherlands, such as his portraits of governors general of the Dutch East Indies. None of these was could have served as source of inspiration for Indonesian artists since at least the end of the colonial era. In terms of documenting the narrative journey from any of these works, to anti-colonialism, to the radical work of Sudjojono which eventually appeared in the late 1930s, there is one major discontinuity in art history.

Nevertheless, there are hitherto unknown elements of continuity. For example Raden Saleh

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had a number of students, especially Raden Koesoema Dibrata, who was active as an artist and an art teacher in the late nineteenth century. Raden Koesoema Dibrata came from West Java and painted portraits of powerful Indonesians which might be interpreted in a nationalistic vein.

Another problem of Indonesian art history is the idea of a discontinuity between Sudjojono’s art and that of the modernist landscape artists who came before him. This is narrated by Holt and others, that Sudjojono was opposed to the ‘Mooi Indië’ or ‘Beautiful Indies’ movement that dominated in the beginning of the 20th century. ‘Mooi Indië’ as a genre of landscape painting (and note, not a style), was challenged by Sudjojono because it presented a colonialist vision of Indonesia, in which everything was peaceful and peasants were happy under Dutch rule. Thus, Sudjojono, as a modernist nationalist, advocated a kind of realism in the depiction of society. However, historians such as Ong Hok Ham have shown landscape paintings by artists such as Wakidi can also be considered as nationalist, since they show their homeland, tanah air (land and water) with a feeling of pride. To date ‘Mooi Indië’ art has not been adequately discussed as part of Indonesian art history.

Another problem for Indonesian art history is that the vision expounded by Kusnadi during the 1976 exhibition erased some aspects from the history of Indonesian fine arts. Some previously considered by Sukarno and others to be ‘Indonesian’ painters, such as the Eurasian Ernst Dezentje, were omitted from this exhibition and subsequent accounts of ‘Indonesian’ art. This was only in part because they were considered Mooi Indië artists, and more based on their heritage. Similarly, Koesnadi excluded artists of Chinese descent. Most significantly, he did not consider Lee Man Fong, one of the most important artists of from the 1930s to the 1960s and former curator of Sukarno’s collection, to be a part of the history of Indonesian art.

Even Sudjojono and his contemporaries have not been adequately explained in Indonesian art history. Sudjojono’s challenge to Mooi Indië art is usually explained in terms of social realism. Sudjojono’s fellow nationalist artists were members of the group PERSAGI, who played an important role in Indonesian cultural life during and after the struggle for independence. Classifying their work as ‘realist’ implies that they were not interested in the formal experimentation that is part of modernism. Yet when we look at works by artists such as Otto Jaya or Hendra Gunawan, what we see are daring challenges to the use of form of colour.

The problem of how to include realism in Indonesian art history is compounded by the way its chief exponents in the middle of the twentieth century, including Sudjojono (until he was expelled from the Communist Party) and Hendra Gunawan were members of LEKRA, the People’s Culture Institute, which was associated with the PKI or Communist Party of Indonesia. LEKRA is chiefly viewed not just as social realist, but as advocating socialist realism, or art in the service of socialism. Yet actually among the LEKRA artists there were many modernists. Amrus Natalsya, for example, the sculptor and painter whom Claire Holt met and admired was influenced by many international currents, especially the Mexican muralists. Batara Lubis was a LEKRA artist who also displayed modern forms, in his search for the roots of fine arts in traditional Indonesian forms. Djoni Trisno was

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4 http://archive.ivaa-online.org/files/uploads/texts/3.%20HINDIA%20YANG%20DIBEKUKAN.pdf
5 Interview with Amrus, 7 March 2017.
another example of a LEKRA artist whose works ranged into the fantastic and formally innovative in style.

Commonly in the standard historiography, LEKRA realism is contrasted with abstraction. This narrative, which is also present in Holt’s book, aligns the former tendency with Yogyakarta (particularly with the art school ASRI, now ISI), and the latter with Bandung abstraction, identified with Ahmad Sadali and other artists from Mahzab Bandung (Bandung School) linked to the ITB. Yet there was in fact much movement between Yogyakarta and Bandung, for example with Hendra Gunawan was based in Bandung in the 1960s (although he set up an oppositional school to ITB). Likewise, not all Bandung artists have been abstract artists, as Srihadi Soedarsono’s work shows. Kusnadi’s attempts to describe Indonesian art history, and those of his successors, have not really resolved all of these problems. LEKRA artists were included in the 1976 exhibition; it was impossible to ignore Hendra, Henk Ngantung and Trubus. Nevertheless, their status was problematic, and Sudarmaji explains this period as one in which political “excesses” “oozed into” “artistic creativity”. The political censorship of the New Order mitigated against any full discussion of LEKRA artists.

It is only in the writings of Sanento Yuliman, continued after his untimely death by the leading writer and curator Jim Supangkat, that we find a truly art historical accounts of modern Indonesian art. Ignoring, and thus challenging, the political pressures of the time, Yuliman looks for common formal relations between works of art and groups of artists. He demonstrates connections and continuities amongst individual artists across the putative realism-abstraction divide. He resolves the art-historical question of progress in art by proposing a stream of ‘lyricism’ that emerges as a key feature of Indonesian art. This term has since become the standard term for discussing development in modern Indonesian art.

The late 1960s and into the 1970s, when Yuliman was formulating his ideas, saw a new development in Indonesian art leading to an anti-aesthetic or anti-formal mode of art, what we now call ‘contemporary.’ As previously mentioned by Dr. Yustiono, it is difficult to explain how contemporary Indonesian art originating in the 1970s as a path of development or progress. Sanento himself was part of the New Art Movement, the first contemporary art movement whose art was dedicated to challenging the political and artistic establishment. It represents discontinuity, since this is a movement making a conscious break with the past, and in which it is hard to find any forms of continuity.

Since the 1970s, other streams or tendencies in art have further compounded the idea of creating a narrative of continuous development. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, one of the most important developments was in painting, from the school that M. Dwi Marianto has identified as “Yogyakarta Surrealism.” Yet Marianto finds the origins of this school more in local social and cultural conditions than in the work of any formal precursors.

6 Pameran Se-Abad Seni Rupa Indonesia (no pagination).
8 M. Dwi Marianto, Surrealisme Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta: Rumah Penerbitan Merapi, 2001), based on a PhD at the University of Wollongong (under my supervision).
Another complicating factor in creating an account of modern and contemporary art history is the continued importance of Bali as a site of art history. Claire Holt’s book, Sukarno’s art collection and the 1976 exhibition identify Bali as having its own form of modern art, one that draws on Balinese traditional arts. If we look at Balinese art from the 1930s, one might say that it is truly modern in its form because the artists also experimented with forms and several other aspects which is far from traditional arts. They gave one explanation about the circumstances around them, so we find a meeting between realism and formal expression which is also quite modern to artists like Dewa Kompiang Kandel Ruka from the 1930s. His work was very abstract, although he was still a representational artist. For example, by depicting one of the villages or a village life in Bali, Dewa Kompiang Kandel Ruka also made an artwork whose modernity is extraordinary. Such innovation also continues through a very contemporary artist who was very radical in her artistic vision, namely the late IGK Murniasih. How her work be linked to development or the history of new art in Indonesia from Raden Saleh and Sudjojono until now is a puzzle. Murni came from the Balinese context, but she made connections with the international world, through the work of her Italian husband and her experience of Indonesian art. So, her works are truly contemporary but a little hard to distinguish whether her work is contemporary ‘Indonesian’ art or contemporary ‘global’ art.

There are other contemporary Balinese artists who do not fit into the context of Indonesian contemporary art, in a straightforward way, but yet are extraordinarily contemporary. Mangu Putra is one. His works tend to be realistic, or hyper realistic, but he is also among those who question the basis of nationalism. He questions the politics of nationalism in Indonesia through recreations of historical photographs in a new context. He questions how relevant the Indonesian Revolution is to today or contemporary life. Another whose works show continuity with old forms while still envision Indonesian characters is Teja Astawa. Besides these, there are also artists such as the from East Java art is active in Australia, Jumaadi. Does Jumaadi still have a position in ‘Indonesian’ art if he is well-known in Australia? Does he fit the narrative in the history of Indonesian art or is he already an international artist?

I do not have a clear conclusion, but I would like to leave you with these questions: Can contemporary art still be discussed as Indonesian art? Does contemporary art have anything to do with previous history? Or is it out of history? For me, we still need more understanding of art history, and history in general, to be able to answer these questions.

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