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Indonesian modern art historiography: national and transnational perspectives

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On Debating Indonesianness

Following the Declaration of Independence, Indonesian artists actively engage in the complexities of their national cultural identity, particularly in painting. They took on the challenge of defining “keindonesiaan dalam seni” (Indonesianness in art) asserting their right to self-determination, advocating for autonomy, and preserving their cultural identities. This “Indonesianness” was not a new issue, as Indonesian artists had previously formulated a way of incorporating “Eastern values” (Eastern values) into their artworks supported by the Japanese regime. The same issue was discussed when PERSAGI painters' works were reviewed by newspaper critics, sparking a debate on who had the authority to define a nation's cultural identity. In this debate, some contended that postcolonial societies should repudiate colonial influence and revert to their pre-colonial origins.

On the other hand, some advocated for a hybrid culture, openly embracing Western art while seeking artistic opportunities from the past Indonesian culture. The ‘discursive war’ between 1945 and 1950, a period of intense debate, was particularly significant. These years were instrumental in shaping modern Indonesian art and further solidifying the Indonesia-centric perspective when evaluating Indonesian identity in artworks created by Indonesian artists.

This chapter examines the debates between 1945 and 1950, highlighting the overlooked and seldom discussed gap in the historiography of Indonesian modern art during this period. The primary concern revolves around the impact of Western influence on Indonesian painting, specifically in the interactions between Indonesian and Dutch artists and critics. Artists like Sudjojono argued that the Indonesian national cultural revolution compelled Indonesian artists to strive for independence and self-determination. Sudjojono comprehended that preserving and expressing the novelty of Indonesian art was the ultimate phase of decolonization, which had already commenced in the late 1930s. To achieve a new Indonesian art style, nationalist artists endeavored to express ideas separate from and unrelated

to their historical background, which was perceived as the inheritance of Dutch East Indies colonial art and Japanese fascism.

The Dutch critic J.M. Hopman¹ raised doubts about Indonesianness in modern Indonesian painting, whereas Simon Admiraal held a different opinion. In contrast to Hopman, Admiraal provides a discerning analysis that showcases his empathy towards the advancement of Indonesian painting. The debate was initially ignited by three exhibitions critiqued in the Dutch-language magazine *Uitzicht*, published in Jakarta. The exhibitions held in Jakarta included *Seni Rupa Indonesia Hari Ini* (Indonesian Painters Today, December 1945), *Pameran Satu Tahun Kemerdekaan* (The Exhibition One Year of Independence, August 1946), and *Pameran Tunggal Emiria Sunnasa* (The Emiria Sunassa Solo Exhibition, November 1946).

Hopman assertively claimed that Indonesian modern art can be characterized as "art that is derived from the imitation of Western art." Since it is simply a form of "imitation art," its presence is essentially "non-existent" and therefore does not require recognition. By employing Western art as a reference, this provocation was perceived as undermining the accomplishments of Indonesian artists and prescribing the path to follow to attain artistic modernity. The discussion extended from *Uitzicht* to encompass national magazines such as *Revolusioner*, *Indonesia*, and *Daya*. The debate continued among fellow nationalist artists to determine what aesthetics were appropriate to represent the identity of Indonesian painting.

This chapter consists of two sub-chapters and simultaneously reflects two phases of the debate surrounding Indonesian values in Indonesian painting. The first, *Exhibitions Provoking Debate*, explains the Indonesian and Dutch artist and critic debates, which are presented chronologically. The second, *From Realism to Indonesianness*, focuses on the argument between Indonesian artists and critics. In this sub-chapter, I will describe the Sudjojono and Trisno Sumardjo debates regarding "Sudjojono realism." In addition, to strengthen the context of debate, I will clarify the impact of the

¹ Johannes Marie Hopman was an art educator and historian. He was noted to have given a lecture about modern architecture at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* before the war. See "Kunstkring – Voordracht", *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 16 July 1930, p. 2. In 1941, Hopman was reported to be continuing the work of his father, Frits Hopman, an art editor. See "Nagelaten Papieren van Frits Hopman", *De Sumatra post*, 29 October 1941, p.7. In September 1946, Hopman worked as a conservator for the state collection in Jakarta. I came upon this proof in a letter he sent to Leiden for J.D. De Loos-Haaxman. See M. De Loos-Haaxman, archives H.666, No. 103, *Correspondentie en aantekeningen over schilderijen en schilders in Batavia*, Leiden University Library Special Collection.

Second Dutch Military Aggression, which occurred from 19 December 1948 to 5 January 1949 and paralyzed the republic's capital, Yogyakarta.

As discussed in Chapter 6, this aggression changed the art scene and led to several artists migrating back to Jakarta. From this shift, the term "Yogyakarta School" emerged representing the stronghold of nationalist artists whose work fell into the genre of distinctive realism and with Sudjojono acting as the leader. In line with that, the "Jakarta School" was considered a melting pot with more cosmopolitan art. Author Idrus named it "Jakarta-ism" to satirize it, which seemed to place Jakarta as a national measure for artist achievement.² Another school of thought, the "Bandung School," enlivened the art scene. This school of thought art is synonymous with Western laboratories because the artists were forged with Western education. The *Conclusion* presents a concise summary of the discourse surrounding the concept of Indonesianness in art, which persisted beyond the 1950s.

Exhibitions Provoking Debate

The exhibition titled *Works of Indonesian Painters Today* took place for a short period from 27 to 31 December 1945, which was approximately four months after the declaration of independence on 17 August 1945 (Fig.7.1). This was the inaugural exhibition organized by a newly sovereign nation to showcase its contemporary cultural essence and the first post-war exhibition globally. This exhibition was an authorized component of an Indonesian government initiative facilitated by the Ministry of Information. It showcased a collection of 141 artworks created by 19 painters displayed at the Sekolah Tabib Tinggi building in Jakarta. The participants consisted of painters from different generations. Some painters were previously engaged in the Japanese period in POETERA and *Keimin Bunka Shidōsho*: Barli, Basuki Abdullah, Hendra Gunawan, Affandi, Emiria Sunassa, Subanto Suriosubandrio, R.M. Soemitro, S. Sudjojono, Rusli, Soelarko, Kartono Yudhokusumo, Sudjana Kerton, E. Abedy, Baharudin Marasutan, Mochtar Apin, Suromo, Patty, Sumartono, and Kusnadi.³

² See N.N. "Djakarta dan Kegiatan Kesenian" in *Siasat*, 24 December 1958, p. 25 and "Kronik Kebudayaan – Tjeramah Idrus," *Siasat*, 3 December 1958, p. 27.

³ Brochure's exhibition of *Works of Indonesian Painters Today* by the Ministry of Information, 1945.

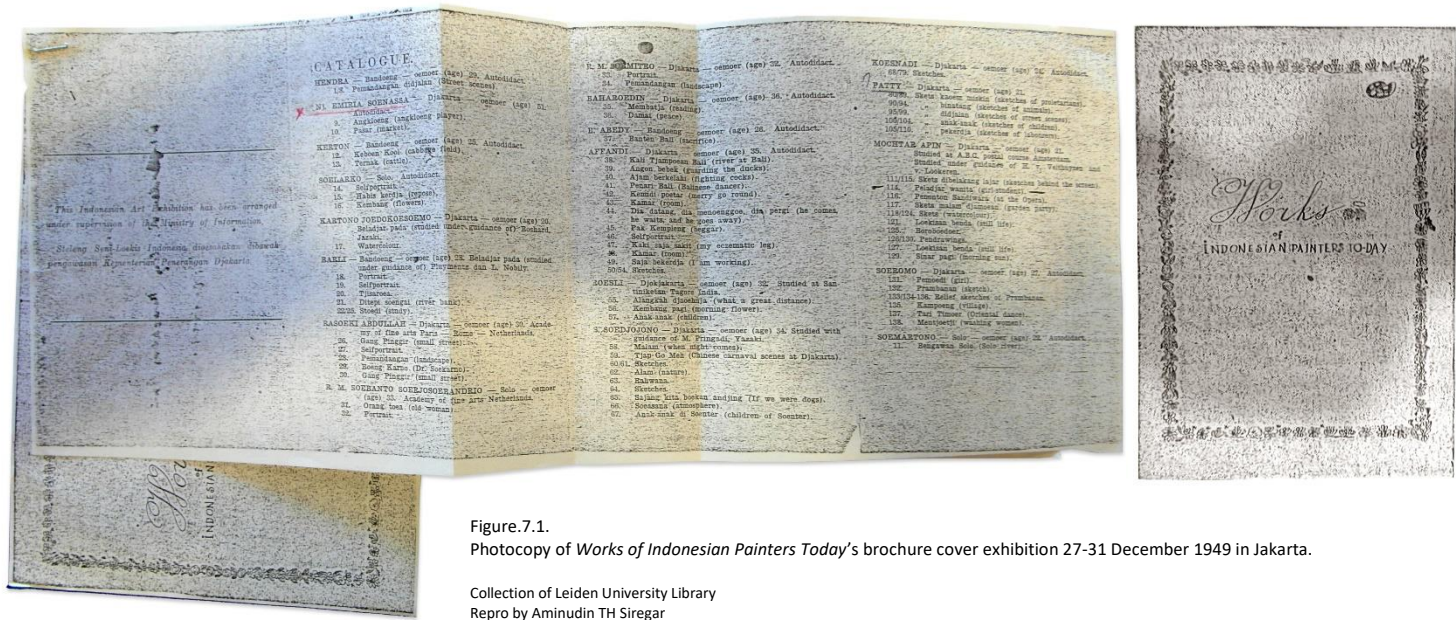


Figure 7.1.
Photocopy of *Works of Indonesian Painters Today's* brochure cover exhibition 27-31 December 1949 in Jakarta.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Unfortunately, I have yet to uncover a more comprehensive source informing us how this exhibition came to be. Aside from that, it is not difficult to conclude that this state-sponsored exhibition had a political agenda. Sutan Sjahrir, Prime Minister at the time, was the figure who initiated this exhibition.⁴ He cleverly used the exhibition as a representation of the nation and an instrument for diplomacy. He fully understood the power of art, and the art world was familiar to him. In the 1930s, for instance, Sjahrir had already discussed art practice and the artist dilemma of making a career in the Netherlands Indies.⁵ Aside from being close to artist circles, Sjahrir also collected several paintings.⁶ Through this exhibition, Sjahrir delivered the message that the new nation achieved the Indonesian revolution with dignity, intellectualism, and a modern outlook. He wanted to rehabilitate the negative perceptions and demonstrate that the Republic was not a group of terrorists, bandits, or extremists.⁷ The desire for Indonesia to receive international sympathy also explains why the exhibition's brochure was printed bilingually (Indonesian and English). The use of the title *Indonesian Painters Today* also emphasized the spirit of newness and contemporary art from an independent nation.⁸

⁴ See this description in Mochtar Lubis, "*Pejuang, Pemikir, dan Peminat Sastra*" in Rosihan Anwar (ed.), *Mengenang Sjahrir*, (Jakarta: PT Gramedia, 1980), p. 203.

⁵ See Sjahrazad, *Renungan Indonesia*, (Djakarta: Penerbit Kebangsaan Pustaka Rakjat, 1947), pp. 18-20.

⁶ See Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 82-83.

⁷ Journalist Mochtar Lubis who came to the exhibition, saw how fascinated the allied forces were when presented with art from "civilized nations," not "terrorists." Lubis wrote: "Indonesian painters have succeeded in speaking about Indonesian humanity to the outside world." See Mochtar Lubis, "*Affandi adalah Affandi*" in Ajip Rosidi, et al., 1978, p. 36.

⁸ I discovered that some works in the exhibition came from the Japanese occupation period and even before that. Based on the list of works on the exhibition brochure, for instance, Sudjojono exhibited

When the exhibition opened, Jakarta was in a critical and worrying state. Papers reported incidents of “shooting, burglary, murder and other acts of violence” between the paramilitaries of the Republic against the NICA⁹ troops in several places.¹⁰ Despite this, the many acts of violence did not diminish the resolve of the Republic's leaders like Sukarno, Muhammad Hatta, and Sutan Sjahrir to attend the heavily guarded exhibition.¹¹ They were not alone – the presence of English military elites at the show raised the exhibition's prestige and signaled unusual diplomacy. Moreover, the friendly atmosphere between visitors, especially the Indonesian and British leaders, was strongly felt, “reinforcing our faith as an independent nation.”¹²

Information Minister Amir Sjarifuddin gave a reception speech, purposefully not mentioning the Dutch. Instead, he shrewdly expressed his happiness regarding the “togetherness of the Indonesian, English and American nations in enjoying this exhibition.” Furthermore, he took advantage of the exhibition opening to gain sympathy by mentioning that “art cuts across all frontiers” and hoped that the exhibition “would be the forerunner of many more functions which will bring together men of good will.”¹³

Sjarifuddin's statements were purposefully directed to a special guest attending the exhibition opening, General Alexander Frank Philip Christison. He was the Commander of the SEAC (Southeast Asia Command) in charge of the recapitulation process in Southeast Asia. In return, Christison served and savored this cultural diplomacy in earnest. On the following day, the presence of the General at the exhibition opening became

Cap Go Meh (1940), *Anak-anak Soenter* (1939), and *Sayang Kita Bukan Anjing* (1944). See the Brochure for *Works of Indonesian Painters Today*, Ministry of Information, December 1945.

⁹ NICA or The Netherlands Indies Civil Administration was established in April 1944 as a quasi-military entity to reinstate civil administration and Dutch colonial law after the ending of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies in the aftermath of World War II.

¹⁰ “Seteleng Loekisan Indonesia” in *Merdeka*, 28 December 1945, p.1.

¹¹ Before the exhibition opened, Sjahrir even experienced an assassination attempt by some armed people who shot his car. This incident made the front pages of various newspapers. See “Mislukte aanslag op Sjahrir” in *Het Parool*, 27 December 1945, p.1., “Incident op Menteng Sjahrir aangehouden en mishandeld” in *Het Dagblad: uitgave van de Nederlandsche Dagbladpers te Batavia*, 27 December 1945, p.1., “Schoten gelost op auto van Soetan Sjahrir Indonesische 'premier' niet getroffen Moordaanslag of poging tot autodiefstal?” in *De Volkskrant*, 27 December 1945, p.1., “Aanslag op Sjahrir” in *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad*, 27 December 1945, p.1. See also See Osman Raliby, *Documenta Historica*, (Djakarta: Bulan-Bintang, 1953), p. 167.

¹² *Merdeka*, 28 December 1945, p.1.

¹³ *Independent*, 28 December 1945, p.1. I haven't found any evidence of who opened the exhibition officially. But according to Mochtar Lubis, this person was Sutan Sjahrir.

news.¹⁴ *Independent* and *Merdeka* even published a photo featuring Sukarno and Christison smiling and enjoying the paintings on the walls. Both exuded a happy and friendly mood (Fig. 7.2).¹⁵



FIGURE 7.2.
Sukarno and Christison enjoying the *Indonesian Painters Today* exhibition.

Collection of National Library of Indonesia
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Quantifying the extent to which Indonesia's political agenda was advanced through this art exhibition is challenging. However, Sjahrir's political strategy, which emphasized diplomacy over warfare, proved effective and provided the Republic with the political support required. Sjahrir's implementation of the "art and diplomacy" strategy in late 1945 was therefore acknowledged as a triumph and garnered global recognition.¹⁶ He realized the global cultural landscape had transformed profoundly following the Second World War.

In his renowned pamphlet *Perdjoeangan Kita* (Our Struggle), Sjahrir astutely analyzed the global landscape, asserting that Indonesia was deeply impacted by the forces of capitalism and Anglo-Saxon imperialism, which held significant sway over its destiny. Benedict Anderson accurately

¹⁴ *Het dagblad: uitgave van de Nederlandsche Dagbladpers te Batavia*, 28 December 1945, p.1.

¹⁵ See the photos on the front cover of *Independent*, 28 December 1945 and *Merdeka*, 28 December 1945.

¹⁶ As observed by Burhanuddin, one of Sjahrir's comrades. See Burhanuddin, "Sjahrir yang Saya Kenal" in Rosihan Anwar (ed.), 1980, p. 68.

interpreted the statement in the pamphlet. He observed that it was necessary to employ delicate diplomacy to prevent the immense influence of American capital from being used to support the efforts of the Dutch to dominate the Indies.¹⁷



FIGURE.7.3. Sutan Sjahrir (right) and Christison (middle) at the opening exhibition.
(Source: *Merdeka*, 28 December 1945)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Simultaneously, Sjahrir aimed to curb the aggressive actions of young militants targeting white individuals. He sought to establish a political framework and institutions that would be endorsed by Western nations while employing a nationalist rhetoric that did not include any radical elements to garner support and understanding from the international community. The *Indonesian Painters Today* exhibition successfully and gracefully constructed the identity and representation of contemporary Indonesia. Sutan Sjahrir skillfully avoided discordance during the Indonesian Revolution (Fig.7.3).

The republic relocated to Yogyakarta at the beginning of 1946. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir continued his duties in Jakarta. Sjahrir subsequently endorsed a collective exhibition from 7 - 13 August 1946. This *One Year of Independence* exhibition allowed Indonesian artists to serve as "cultural diplomats" during the World Festival of Youth and Students in Prague.¹⁸ Nevertheless, due to legal documentation issues, the

¹⁷ See introduction by Benedict R.O'G. Anderson in Sutan Sjahrir, *Perjuangan Kita: Edisi khusus 90 Tahun Sutan Sjahrir*, (Jakarta: Pusat Dokumentasi Politik Guntur 49, 1996), p. 22.

¹⁸ "Seteling Seni-Loekis", *Ra'jat*, 8 August 1946, p. 2.

artist delegation was unable to commence their journey.¹⁹ The Prague exhibition's materials were subsequently exhibited at the former *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* building in Jakarta as a commemoration of the first anniversary of independence.

An integral piece of this exhibition was a compilation of 19 linoleum sheets crafted by the *Gelanggang* group exponents Baharudin Marasutan and Mochtar Apin. The album was produced in 36 editions, each containing written descriptions in three languages: Indonesian, English, and French.²⁰ Apart from being exhibited, the linoleum albums were distributed by the Indonesian Government to several other nations to represent Indonesian sovereignty.

Locating comprehensive details regarding the *One Year of Independence* exhibition proves arduous. I discovered a critique authored by Rivai Apin, the sibling of Mochtar Apin, published in *Noesantara* magazine in September 1946. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the insufficient attention given to the historical exhibition. "There were only brief news excerpts," he stated. However, Apin emphasized that the exhibition's significance remained essential as it "enlightened the global community about the advancements in our art."²¹ Apin succinctly examined multiple works, acknowledging the artists who took part in the exhibition as much as possible.

Nevertheless, he may not have accurately depicted all the individuals involved. The painters featured in Apin's coverage included Affandi, Agus Djaya, Hendra Gunawan, Baharuddin Marasutan, Henk Ngantung, Kartono Yudhokusumo, Mochtar Apin, Subanto Suriosubandrio, S. Sudjojono, Trubus Sudarsono, Sudihardjo, Surono, and Suromo. Rivai Apin's inventory comprises novel symptoms manifested in specific artworks. However, he did not provide further details or explanations on the subject. Conversely, he concluded the article by asserting that the exhibition provided gratification to the spectators.²²

¹⁹ According to Sudjojono, the Dutch urged the Indonesian delegation to leave using Dutch East Indies passports. In contrast, the delegation insisted on using Indonesian passports. See Mia Bustam, 2013, p. 75.

²⁰ See Rivai Apin, "Membitjarakan Loekisan" in *Noesantara*, Th.1, No. 5-6-7, 20 September 1946, p. 173-174. See also Sanento Yuliman, *Monumen Grafis 17 Agustus 1946*, Tempo, 25 August 1990. It is important to note that Yuliman has never mentioned the linoleum albums ever being exhibited.

²¹ Rivai Apin, "Membitjarakan Loekisan" in *Noesantara*, 20 September 1946, p.173.

²² Rivai Apin, 1946, p.174.



Figure 7.4. Dolf Verspoor, *Indonesische Schilders van Heden*, 1946.
(Source: *Uitzicht*, 11 September 1946)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Provocation from *Uitzicht*

Rivai Apin had company while reviewing the exhibition in September. I came across an article published in *Uitzicht*²³ in that same month by Dutch author Dolf Verspoor (Fig. 7.4).²⁴ I discovered, for example, numerous resemblances in the names of artists mentioned in the articles both Verspoor and Rivai Apin authored. In addition to Verspoor's written content, *Uitzicht* included two pages featuring reproductions of artworks by Affandi and Sudjojono, accompanied by the caption "from an exhibition held last December."²⁵ The exhibition mentioned is *Indonesian Painters Today*, which occurred in December 1945. The *Uitzicht* editors included two additional pages to facilitate a connection between both exhibitions, as conveyed by Verspoor's review.

²³ The weekly magazine *Uitzicht* was published under R.V.D. (*Regeeringsvoorlichtingsdienst*), The Information Service of the Dutch Government in Jakarta. Indonesian press considers the magazine relatively moderate and objective in reporting the struggles of the Indonesian Republic. See *Pantja Raja*, 15 March 1947, p.310.

²⁴ Dolf Verspoor (1917-1994) was a popular poet and translator. He was in Java when the revolution began. Close to Indonesian political, academic, and artists, Verspoor stood with the Republic. He was also close friends with S. Sudjojono and often gifted him with books. Verspoor was against the military aggression executed by the Dutch. He returned to Holland in 1950 and worked as a translator and a playwright. His articles remained a regular feature in Indonesian cultural magazines. For further reading, see *Yearbook of Society of Dutch Literature*, 1998, p. 181-189. See Rosihan Anwar, *Iseng dengan Dolf Verspoor in Mimbar Indonesia*, 4 February 1950, pp. 19 and 21. See also Mia Bustam, 2013, p. 156.

²⁵ *Uitzicht*, 11 September 1946, pp. 6-7.



Figure 7.5.
J. M. Hopman, *Toekomst van de Beeldende Kunst in Indonesië*, 1946.
(Source: *Uitzicht*, No. 49-50, Kerstnummer December 1946)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

Verspoor's article, "Indonesische Schilders van Heden" (Indonesian Painters Today) aims to revitalize Indonesian painting and enhance its presence. The emerging painters exhibited a notable departure from their predecessors, who solely depicted the natural beauty of the East Indies. Verspoor argues that Affandi and Sudjojono, who represent the new generation, have introduced a groundbreaking approach characterized by their distinct personalities. Furthermore, this emerging generation has a particular preference for which items they chose to paint. The majority of paintings explore everyday life topics through the use of "intuition" rather than relying solely on "technique." Nevertheless, Verspoor notes that these constraints have not deterred the artists from producing their artworks. Concluding the discussion, Verspoor acknowledged the painters' perseverance as "avant-garde, effectively representing their nation and people (*als avant-garde, hun land en volk tot uitdrukking gebracht hebben*)."²⁶

Three months following Verspoor's evaluation, *Uitzicht* released an extensive article by J.M. Hopman (Fig.7.5). Although this is not explicitly stated, I assert that Hopman's article was a critical response to Verspoor.

²⁶ See Dolf Verspoor, "Indonesische Schilders van Heden" in *Uitzicht*, 11 September 1946, p. 11.

Also, I contend that Hopman's choice of the title *Toekomst van de Beeldende Kunst in Indonesië* (The Future of Art in Indonesia) implies his intention to focus on "Western art in Indonesia," as indicated by the use of the preposition "in." Conversely, Verspoor deliberately chose the title *Indonesische Schilders van Heden* to demonstrate his endorsement of Indonesian painters' inventive work and expertise.

Hopman commenced his article with the bold assertion that "Indonesian painting does not yet exist and for the time being, it will not exist." The basis of his argument was derived from his observation of the accomplishments of Indonesian painters at two exhibitions: *Indonesian Painters Today* (1945) and, notably, *One Year of the Republic* (1946). Hopman observed that the painters' diligent efforts inherently warrant the audience's attention. However, the accomplishments derived from such arduous labor do not necessarily reflect the qualities of contemporary Indonesian art. However, what is evident are artworks demonstrating the Indonesian painters' captivation with Western painting. Hopman proceeded:

The exhibited artwork contained Eastern subject matter, but the presentation style adhered strictly to modern Western art. The occurrence was so atypical of Eastern culture that it elicited astonishment. Without Kokoschka, Klee, Munch, Chagall, Utrillo, and others, artists in Java would never have painted [in the manner] as could be seen at both exhibitions.²⁷

Hopman's statement evoked a sense of revisiting the writings of Dutch authors who had previously covered the PERSAGI exhibition. During that period, the PERSAGI painters were also criticized for deviating from the principles of Eastern painting. The pervasive impact of Western painting resulted in the erosion of Indonesian painting's distinctiveness, it was said,

²⁷ J. Hopman, "Toekomst van de Beeldende Kunst in Indonesië", *Uitzicht*, No. 49-50, Kerstnummer December 1946, p.18. "Het daar geëxposeerde werk was naar de inhoud Oosters doch de uitbeeldingswijze geheel en al in navolging van Westerse moderne kunst. Ze was zelfs zo typisch on-Oosters dat men er zich over verbaasde. Zonder Kokoschka, Klee, Munch, Chagall, Utrillo, c.s. zou op Java nooit zijn geschilderd als beide tentoonstellingen te zien gaven." See also copies that have been translated in Indonesian in D. Suradji, *Bertebaran: Rangkuman Tulisan Menyinari Seni Drama, Film, Lukis dan Sketsa Ibukota R.I.S.* (Jakarta: Haruman Hidup, 1961), pp. 147-148. An Indonesian version of Hopman's article was also published in S. Sudjojono's book. See S. Sudjojono, *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa*, (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, 1948).

leading it to adopt an ironically more Western character than Western art itself. Hence, it was thought imperative to provide proper guidance to the Indonesian painters. Hopman shared the same viewpoint - he believed it was essential to acknowledge that Eastern art possesses unique characteristics, particularly in its techniques and precision. He lamented the absence of these qualities in the artworks displayed. Indonesian painters disregarded materials and methods, which is similar to what occurred with European impressionists. Indonesian painters operated with a sense of urgency within this context. Hopman expressed his dissatisfaction with the significant impact of fauvism on Indonesian painters.

Nevertheless, he comprehended that this inclination to exalt unrestrained energy was "congruent with the profound transformations taking place in Indonesia."²⁸ In addition, Hopman openly displayed his stereotypical belief that the exuberant portrayal of freedom on canvas contradicted the conventional expectations associated with the East (Asia). He wrote: "It struck the Westerner that people in Asia never show their feelings except in a carefully considered act performed inconspicuously."²⁹

Verspoor previously hypothesized that Indonesian painting was undergoing a "revolution" in which the painters deliberately abandoned traditional doctrines or principles to generate novel artistic expressions. Hopman objected to Verspoor's rationale, which was considered hasty. Instead of putting faith in the revolution, Hopman proposed that Indonesian painters must comprehend the developmental process "with patience (*geduld*)."³⁰ Following that recommendation, he proceeded to delineate the stages of development. For instance, he evaluated that the achievements displayed by the artists at the exhibition only reflected the "first phase." The artist must attain the other steps, namely searching for the essence of self and something national and regional. Even if an artist accomplishes the "personal phase," the work is still of value to humanity because "in the uniqueness, we find a familiar light."³⁰

Like a master to his pupils, Hopman dispensed advice to "be patient in reaching maturity." He closed his article by saying: "If Indonesian art has reached such a level, then it will be more than a charming attraction; it will

²⁸ J. Hopman, 1946, p. 18. "Het past inderdaad zeer goed bij de grote gisting in de huidige Indonesische wereld."

²⁹ J. Hopman, 1946, p. 18. "Het trof den Westerling dat men in Azië zijn gevoelens niet toonde, behalve in een enkele met zorg overwogen daad onopvallend verricht."

³⁰ J. Hopman, 1946, p. 18. "Omdat men in het bijzondere de glans van het algemeene vond."

be valuable for the entire world. I believe it can reach this point - if one has the patience of wisdom and sincere love because no art or a true civilization grows without this." ³¹

Figure 7.6.
Simon Admiraal, *Nieuwe Indonesische Schilderkunst – Het Werk van Emiria Sunassa als symptom, 1947.*
(Source: *Uitzicht*, 2^e jaargang No.1, 1 January 1947)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

In the subsequent issue of *Uitzicht*, published in January 1947, Simon Admiraal, indirectly responded to Hopman's article with his piece titled *Nieuwe Indonesische Schilderkunst – Het Werk van Emiria Sunassa als symptom* (New Indonesian art - the works of Emiria Sunassa as a Symptom) (Fig.7.6). The article examines the outcomes of Emiria Sunassa's solo exhibition.³² However, Admiraal directed his propositions towards Hopman. Admiraal

³¹ J. Hopman, 1946, p. 19. "Als Indonesische kunst zover gekomen is zal ze meer zijn dan een bekoorlijke bezienswaardigheid, zal ze van waarde zijn voor heel de wereld. Ik geloof dat zij zover kan komen – als men het geduld der wijsheid heeft en vooral oprechte liefde, want zonder deze groeit geen kunst geen waarachtige beschaving trouwens."

³² Emiria Sunassa's solo exhibition was held on 15 – 22 November 1946 at the old *Batavia Kunstkring*, Jakarta. The resulting sales from this exhibition were donated to the Indonesian Red Cross. See *Merdeka*, 13 November 1946, p.2.



positioned himself as a sympathizer of the new Indonesian painting movement by using the term *Nieuwe Indonesische* (New Indonesian). To embrace the new phenomena, as Admiraal explained, it was essential not to evaluate Indonesian artists based on past accomplishments, particularly in comparison to European art standards. This was how Admiraal criticized Hopman at the start of his article.

Subsequently, he analyzed the vulnerabilities and merits of Sunassa's artworks by carefully dissecting them. In terms of technique, particularly regarding the portrayal of life, the painter still lacked sufficient experience. Admiraal perceived this as a vulnerability. However, he also pronounced that technique alone should not be considered the sole crucial factor. Sunassa's power lies in her ability to compel us to become more intrigued by her spiritual experiences. This provides an enhancement for the person observing. Sunassa's paintings also offered a "new sensation," which expanded her emotional encounters. These strengths subsequently triumphed over Sunassa's limitations.³³

The symptoms of modernity in Sunassa's works are intricately intertwined with her Indonesian background, showcasing her distinctive and sophisticated expression, use of color, personal experiences, sincerity, and subtle artistic sensibility, all of which distinguish her from European painters. Admiraal recognizes the importance of comprehending the varied artistic styles and distinctions in a painter's work. Subsequently, he elaborated on the significance of creative technique. Does Sunassa possess a distinctive artistic manner or characteristic way of expressing herself? Admiraal stated that style is not as pressing as the aspects above. According to him, including these diverse elements enhanced the significance of Sunassa's paintings.

Admiraal noted that the signs of the transition to modernity were apparent in the artworks of Sunassa and other painters. The creation of that painting is not a mere recreational pursuit involving paints and brushes but

³³ Simon Admiraal, "Nieuwe Indonesische Schilderkunst – Het werk van Emiria Sunassa als symptoom" in *Uitzicht*, 2^e jaargang No.1, 1 January 1947, p.10. "Dit alles bepaalt haar levensrythme, waardoor wij nader tot de boeiende inhoud van haar wezen komen. Dan valt het niet meer zoo op dat zij geen handen kan schilderen; dat ze nog vele malen onervaren, haar voor slechts luttel jaren terug geleerde olieverfschilderstechniek, niet behoorlijk genoeg hanteert; geen portret naar het leven kan schilderen, omdat ze dan te veel gebonden is aan het object. Maar zij dwingt ons tot de diepere belangstelling voor wat zij ons van haar eigen doorleefde innerlijke gewaarwordingen heeft te vertellen. En dit is een verrijking voor iederen beschouwer, wanneer hij verwantschap met enkele daarvan kan mede aanvoelen, of hem een nieuwe gewaarwording doet beleven, die een uitbreiding beteekent voor zijn gevoelservaringen."

If an Indonesian painter wants to reach the heights he dreams of, he only needs to be, in the most profound meaning thereof, in his own greatness and in his own limitation: an Indonesian.³⁴

Figure.7.7.
Simon Admiraal, *Rondom de hedendaagse Indonesische Schilderkunst*, 1947.
(Source: *Uitzicht*, 2^e Jaargang No.14/15, 9 April 1947)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

³⁴ Simon Admiraal, 1947, p. 10. "Wil de Indonesische schilder de hoogten bereiken die in zijn wensdroom liggen opgesloten, dan heeft hij slechts te zijn, in de diepste betekenis hiervan, in eigen grootheid en in eigen beperking: een Indonesiër."

Admiraal's perspectives on the advancement of Indonesian contemporary art are featured in the April issue of *Uitzicht*. In this instance, under the title “Rondom de hedendaagse Indonesische Schilderkunst” (Surrounding Contemporary Indonesian Painting), Admiraal approached modernity issues from a more discerning perspective. He recognized the perspective of those who argue that Indonesian painters still employ Western techniques in their paintings (Fig.7.7). Nevertheless, Admiraal also noted the assimilation of the Western approach during the process, thereby diminishing its exclusive significance. Admiraal contended that the artworks created by Indonesian painters during the Japanese occupation differed remarkably from the previous period, which lacked vitality and emotion.

During the Japanese period, most of the paintings showed what Admiraal called "the experience of the East, especially Indonesianness," which accommodates emotional and esoteric experiences that are explosive. In addition, the painters demonstrated the will, confidence, and vision to realize their Indonesian goals. For Admiraal, the results achieved during the Japanese period eventually shaped the character of modern Indonesian painting.

This was the starting point of discovering new Indonesian painting, thanks to the powerful desire of the artists and their explosive self-awareness, to create something that had for centuries been locked in a glasshouse.³⁵

Admiraal criticized Hopman for his point of view – shared with most foreign writers – of associating the achievements of new paintings with classic Indonesia. "There is no point in comparing this young Indonesian art with its own old traditional art. We can assume that it [the young art] has released itself from it [the old traditional art] and fully roots in the now," Admiraal stated.³⁶ He also questions efforts to compare Indonesian and European modern art, as he thinks they are incomparable.

³⁵ Simon Admiraal, “Rondom de hedendaagse Indonesische Schilderkunst” in *Uitzicht*, 2^e Jaargang No.14/15, 9 April 1947, p. 22. “Dit betekende het startpunt van de nieuwe Indonesische schilderkunst die was gevonden, gesteund door het dwingend willen der kunstenaars en aangemoedigd door de losbrekende zelfbewustheid in deze voor hen wezenlijke verrukking, naar een verwerkelijking van wat eeuwenlang sluimerend als in een broeikas opgesloten had gezeten.”

³⁶ Simon Admiraal, 1947, p. 23. “Het heeft geen zin deze jonge Indonesische kunst te vergelijken met haar eigen oude traditionele. Men kan aannemen dat zij zich ervan bevrijd heeft en volkomen wortelt in deze tijd.”

In addition, Admiraal asked why there are still people who confront modern Indonesian painting with European art. In his view, the two are incomparable. At this point, Admiraal wanted to state that Western art is not the only master of narrative that has authority and can make comparisons between itself and the art developing outside it. It was essential to understand that art outside Europe will someday create and construct its history – as seen in the success of Indonesian artists in developing their new art. Therefore, Admiraal wrote:

It is impossible to reach an equal level of art in such a brief time if compared to European art. But guided by a strong will, pushed by the desire to consciously self-express, it [the art] has already achieved results that amaze us and make us veritably interested in its future. To doubt this would be to ignore what has already been achieved.³⁷

We Know Where We Will Be Taking Indonesian Painting

The discourse regarding the presence of the new Indonesian art in *Uitzicht* magazine was short-lived. Admiraal's article in April 1947 marked the final publication on the subject. However, in February 1947, S. Sudjojono's article was featured in the *Revolusioner*³⁸ magazine, explicitly refuting Hopman's arguments. There is no information regarding Sudjojono's reason for not responding to Hopman in the same magazine. Nevertheless, the two engaged in an indirect intellectual confrontation. In a manner reminiscent of the Persagi era, Sudjojono composed his writings in the Indonesian language, envisioning his audience to be fellow Indonesian artists.

In his influential essay titled “Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa” (We Know Where We Will Be Taking Indonesian Painting), Sudjojono emphasized the importance of self-

³⁷ Simon Admiraal, 1947, p. 23. “Het kan op een zo korte termijn, vergeleken met de Europese moderne kunst, onmogelijk zulk een evenwaardig kunstniveau bereikt hebben. Maar geleid door de ontembare wil, gestuwd door de vrij gekomen expressie-drift in eigen zelfbewustheid heeft zij reeds resultaten bereikt, die ons verbazen en wezenlijk geïnteresseerd doen zijn voor haar toekomst. Hieraan te twijfelen zou een miskenning zijn van het thans reeds bereikte.”

³⁸ *Revolusioner* is an Indonesian-language magazine published by PESINDO (Indonesia Socialist Youths). This revolutionary youth organization was anti-colonialist and far-left. For more about PESINDO, see Norman Joshua Soelias, *Pesindo-Pemuda Sosialis Indonesia 1945-1950*, (Tangerang Selatan: Marjin Kiri, 2016).

determination for Indonesian artists (Fig. 7.8). The artists autonomously defined the trajectory of their art and its evolution without any guidance or direction from the colonialists. The colonization process hindered a nation's ability to comprehend its own identity, either independently or from the colonizer's perspective. Colonialism has distorted and amplified biased information in the arts.

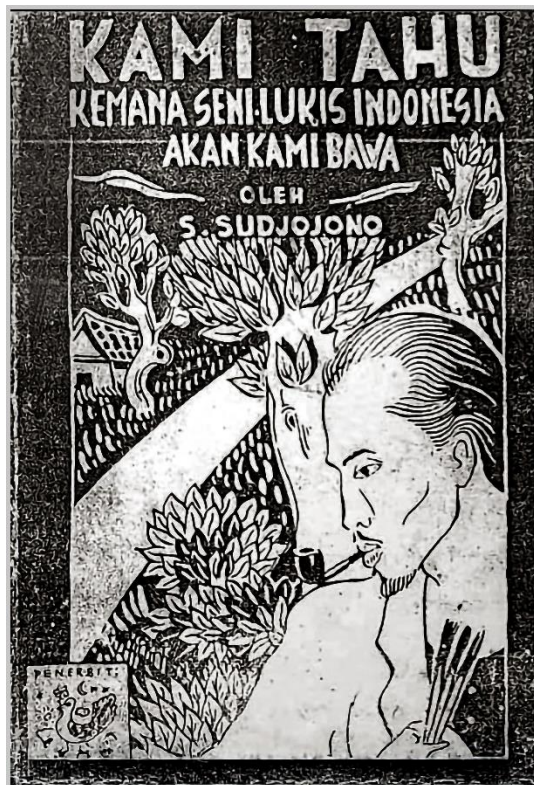


Figure.7.8.
Photocopy of Sudjojono book's cover *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa*, 1948.

Private Collection

When analyzing Sudjojono's article mentioned above, I discovered that he believes that artistic expression is a ubiquitous pursuit of humanity that surpasses geographical and cultural barriers. The belief that art is limited to the Western world dramatically underestimates the abundant traditions, varied narratives, and innovative forms of creative expression worldwide. Sudjojono thus harbors significant doubts regarding assertions of universal truths that assert art as the sole domain of the Western world.

By contrast, Sudjojono asserts that art originated from the East, as did global civilization. He argued, "The most ancient artwork originates from Egypt, rather than Europe." Sudjojono refuted Hopman's patronizing perspective on the presence of Indonesian painting by asserting, "The construction of the Borobudur temple serves as undeniable evidence. Comparing the temple to the dolmen (*hunebedden*) or *Amsterdamse beurs* building is akin to comparing the prophet to the pagans."³⁹ Sudjojono acknowledged Hopman's assertion that Indonesian painting is influenced by and exhibits Western characteristics. However, he emphasized that influence in painting is widespread and does not require exaggeration. Indonesian art and Western art mutually influenced each other during a specific period.

As Indonesians, we acknowledge that our painting style currently exhibits Western characteristics. However, it is inaccurate to claim that it is not Indonesian painting. Firstly, because prior to Raden Saleh, the practice of painting had already been established for a considerable duration, albeit with different stylistic conventions than those employed presently. This exhibited a robust correlation with our perception of life during that period. Secondly, because if we have temporarily abandoned our previous methods, it is important to note that this is not a period of imitating or simply replicating, but rather an immersive experience aimed at uncovering the truth within the theories of da Vinci, Durer, Cézanne, and other artists.⁴⁰

Sudjojono and his colleagues revitalized Indonesian art by drawing inspiration from a fresh historical perspective, distinct from the history shaped by Dutch colonization over an extended period. Thus, Sudjojono strongly advised the Dutch to refrain from intervening, as the cultivation of

³⁹ S. Sudjojono, *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa*, (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, 1948), pp. 4-5. "Kita bisa membuat Borobudur yang kalau dibandingkan dengan hunnebedden dan *de Amsterdamse Beurs* Belanda, sebenarnya perbandingan antara seorang nabi dan seorang heiden."

⁴⁰ S. Sudjojono, 1948, p. 3. "Kita bangsa Indonesia mengakui bahwa tjeorak seni lukis disini bertjeorak Barat sekarang. Tapi untuk dikatakan bahwa ini bukan seni lukis Indonesia, ini tidak benar. Nomor satu sebab kita, sebelum Raden Saleh, sudah lama punya seni lukis, meskipun tjeoraknya tidak seperti kita sekarang melukis. Dan ini mempunjai sebab2 yang bergandengan erat dengan pandangan hidup kita pada waktu itu. Nomor dua, sebab kalau kita sekarang meninggalkan tjara lama kita sebentar bukanlah ini suatu fase dimana kita mengekor atau mengcopy sadja, akan tetapi suatu belevenis dengan kebenaran yang ada pada teori2 Da Vinci, Durer, Cézanne, dan lain-lain."

Indonesian art is the sole responsibility of Indonesian painters. Sudjojono asserts his authority over Hopman by cautioning him that he and his colleagues had been well aware of how and where they would determine the direction of Indonesian painting: "And how future Indonesian painting will be, we Indonesians will be fully capable of shaping it. From the years of Dutch colonization (in Persagi times) we have already known how and where to direct our painting. And if now the Dutch in *Uitzicht* want to meddle, we have no need or fit. They have never, in a period of 350 years, proven that they are capable of this."⁴¹

In conclusion, Sudjojono assures Hopman that Indonesian artists will consistently demonstrate reverence towards European artists. Meanwhile, Indonesian artists will persist in advancing and perpetuating their revolution and empowering their people to cultivate artistic abilities, as "our revolution encompasses not only intellectual but also artistic endeavors."⁴² Sudjojono's reply to Hopman effectively conveys a robust sense of nationalism and seems to defend Indonesian painting from Western guidance. This is not a novel controversy, as it has been illuminated previously. The distinction lies in that conversations regarding Western influence arose during the revolutionary era within the framework of decolonization, which emphasized the importance of national autonomy. Nevertheless, a small number of Indonesian art writers persist in their efforts to expand their perspectives.

Ida Nasoetion (Fig. 7.9), an essayist and art critic close to the *Gelanggang* group, has some thoughts on the subject.⁴³ Nasoetion was the

⁴¹ S. Sudjojono, 1948, pp. 14-15. "Dan tentang bagaimana seni-lukis di Indonesia jang akan datang, kita bangsa Indonesia tjukup tjakap untuk mengaturnja sendiri. Dari djaman pendjadjahan Belanda dahulu (di djaman "PERSAGI"-Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia) kami sudah tahu bagaimana dan kemana kami akan membawa seni-lukis kami. Dan kalau sekarang bangsa Belanda mau utik2 tentang hal ini, kita tidak butuh tjampur tangan mereka. Mereka tidak pernah dalam tempo kurang lebih 350 tahun membuktikan bahwa mereka tjakap juga dalam soal ini."

⁴² Sudjojono, 1948, p. 15. "Dan kesalahan2 teman kami di Eropa tidak akan kami maki2 dan kami undat2, tetapi akan kami hormati sebab mereka sudah bekerdja sebisa-bisa mereka dengan tulus ichlas dan korban jiwa untuk tjita2 jang bagus dan pekerdjaan mereka tetap akan kami pakai penundjuk sebagai kapal karam dilautan perdjjoangan masjarakat kita di dunia dan di revolusi kami di Indonesia ini, untuk membuat tidak sadja di seniman mendjadi artistik, tetapi djuga seluruh masjarakat mendjadi artistik bewust sebagi di Indonesia sediakala. Kami akan menjelesaikan revolusi kami tidak verstandelijk sadja akan tetapi djuga artistik."

⁴³ Ida Nasoetion was 26 years old when she wrote the essay. With Chairil Anwar, she was the cultural editor of the *Gelanggang* for the weekly magazine *Siasat*. Nasoetion also worked as an editor for *Inzicht* and later the weekly *Kritiek en Opbouw*, with a mixed Dutch-Indonesian editorial staff. In early 1948, when Dutch painters Wim Schippers and Henk de Vos exhibited in Jakarta, few could review the exhibition, except for Nasoetion. *Oriëntatie* magazine editor Rob Nieuwenhuys hailed Nasoetion's writing as "the only witty critique." Rob Nieuwenhuys "Moderne Schilderkunst in Batavia" in *Oriëntatie- cultureel maandblad*, No.6, 20 March 1948, p. 41.

only postcolonial Indonesian female critic with an astute sharp and broad view of art development during the revolution. Unfortunately, she did not live long.⁴⁴

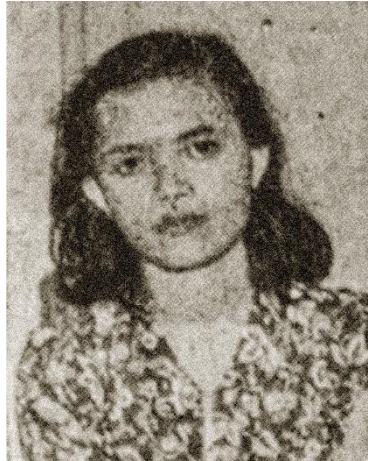


Figure. 7.9.
Ida Nasoetion.
(Sources: *Siasat*, 2 Januari 1957)

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Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

In her 1948 short essay, “Pengaruh Barat” (Western Influence), Nasoetion wrote that the notion of Indonesian art should be freed from burdens, whether it be politics or society. Nasoetion asserted that artists are unable to dissociate themselves from their community. Conversely, artists, according to her, are not subservient to the people or subjugated by a political group. The issue lies in the artist's defensive stance against foreign influences, as well as their emphasis on prioritizing the nationalist milieu. In order to accomplish their objective, they establish boundaries. These limits

⁴⁴ On 23 March 1948, Nasoetion was declared mysteriously missing. She is believed to have been kidnapped and killed. See “Ida Nasoetion vermist”, *De locomotief: Samarangsch handels-en advertentie-blad*, 3 April 1948, p. 1 and “Ontvoerd?”, *Het dagblad: uitgave van de Nederlandsche Dagbladpers te Batavia*, 5 April 1948, p. 2. Nasoetion also worked as an editor for *Inzicht* and later the weekly *Kritiek en Opbouw*, with a mixed Dutch-Indonesian editorial staff. In early 1948, when Dutch painters Wim Schippers and Henk de Vos exhibited in Jakarta, few could review the exhibition, except for Nasoetion. Because of her writing, *Oriëntatie* magazine editor Rob Nieuwenhuys hailed Nasoetion's writing as “the only witty critique.” Rob Nieuwenhuys “Moderne Schilderkunst in Batavia” in *Oriëntatie- cultureel maandblad*, No.6, 20 March 1948, p. 41.

are purely speculative as it is evident in everyday life that everyone in Indonesia is exposed to Western culture. Nasoetion stated that, despite its youthful age and lack of historical background, the nation possesses a distinctive motto and a strong determination to convey the truth. These instruments are sufficient for Indonesian artists to dare to expose themselves to all influences. Thus, Nasoetion is content with Western influence in art. On the contrary, "the thing artists should be concerned about is their own lack of strength."⁴⁵

I think that Nasoetion directed her writing to Sudjojono. On the other hand, in his letter to critic Muhammad Balfas, Sudjojono once expressed his disappointment with Nasoetion, because she accused him of failing to find newness in painting. In that letter (to Balfas), Sudjojono, on the contrary, denies looking for something new. He writes that the so-called new has never existed on earth. Interestingly, he also conveyed Ida Nasoetion's criticism was nonsense (*omongkosong*). Sudjojono assumed that Nasoetion had the ambition to define Indonesian art, and she was too eager to determine what was good or bad. Sudjojono, therefore, objected to Indonesian art taking a particular direction (Western art) - as Nasoetion wanted.⁴⁶

The debate on Western influence in Indonesian art continued and triggered another response. With the title "Seni Rupa Indonesia Sekarang" (Indonesian Art Now), published in March 1949, another *Gelanggang* group exponent, Baharudin Marasutan, revisited Hopman's doubts on Indonesianness in Indonesian painting. For Marasutan, this doubt or even accusation of Indonesian painting copying the West was not a new issue.

If someone says that Indonesian art is a mere copy or imitation of Western art, then this is not a new story for us, let alone for painters, but an entirely stale statement; it would be just as trite if I said that Western modern art came into being because Europe received inspiration and a new soul from Eastern art.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ida Nasoetion, "Pengaruh Barat" in *Siasat*, 29 Februari 1948, p. 5.

⁴⁶ See S. Sudjojono, "A letter to Balfas," 15 July 1948, Archives of H.B. Jassin Literary Documentation Center, Jakarta, S. Sudjojono folder.

⁴⁷ Baharudin Marasutan, *Seni Rupa Indonesia Sekarang* in *Daya*, 25 March 1949, p. 5. "Apabila ada orang mengatakan seni rupa Indonesia ialah suatu tiruan atau imitasi belaka dari seni rupa Barat, maka ini bukanlah tjerita baru buat kita, apalagi buat seniman-seniman pelukis, tapi suatu utjapan jang sudah basi sama sekali, sama basinja kalau saja mengatakan bahwa seni rupa modern Barat di Eropah mendapat ilham dan djiwa baru dari seni rupa Timur."

However, Marasutan defended the existence of Indonesian painting by saying:

We admit that our current painting does not have a definite and accurate style like Western painting, but this does not mean our painting is uninhabited. We have just renewed our art of painting; in this great endeavor, we are interested in modern European painting because, we found there some excellent gems and references for the development of Indonesian art today.⁴⁸

Marasutan concluded his writing by revisiting Simon Admiraal's perspectives on the advancement of Indonesian painting.⁴⁹ He agreed with Admiraal, who claimed that the style of Indonesian painting was specifically tailored to address the contemporary challenges facing Indonesian society. Moreover, according to Marasutan, Admiraal also acknowledged the existence of numerous fundamental distinctions between Western and Indonesian paintings. Rather than accentuating the disparities, Admiraal elucidated the similarities: "a concerted effort to eradicate outdated customs, employing an ardent approach, in order to supplant them with a novel methodology."⁵⁰ Indonesian artists implemented this modification with fervor and zealous enthusiasm, while maintaining complete focus. Still quoting Admiraal, Marasutan continued that painting encompasses not only the act of self-expression but also the artist's proficiency in manipulating painting materials. This faith is crucial to revert Indonesian painters' artworks from being "adequate replicas of Western painting."⁵¹

In *Brochure Kesenian* (Arts Brochure), an art magazine published by the Information Ministry, Sudjojono reaffirmed his discontent with Hopman following Marasutan in late 1949. Hopman was perceived as having dictated

⁴⁸ Baharudin Marasutan, 1949, p. 5. "Kita akui seni lukis kita sekarang belum punja tjorak jang tentu dan njata seperti seni lukis Barat, tapi ini belum berarti suatu kehampaan dari kesenian kita. Kita baru sadja memperbaharui seni lukis kita dan dalam usaha jang besar ini kita tertarik dengan seni lukis Eropah jang modern, sebab dalam seni lukis Eropah Barat ini kita menemui beberapa bibit-bibit dan bahan-bahan jang sungguh baik untuk perkembangan seni rupa Indonesia sekarang."

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Marasutan did not reveal the source he was referring to. I think, most likely, Marasutan was referring to Admiraal's writings in *Uitzicht*.

⁵⁰ Baharudin Marasutan, 1949, p. 5. "Tjorak seni lukis Indonesia disesuaikan dengan soal2 jang dihadapi masjarakat Indonesia sekarang"; "Usaha untuk melenjapkan kebiasaan2 jang kolot, dengan tjara jang bersemangat, untuk mengganti dengan tjara jang baru. Mereka melakukan perobahan ini dengan nafsu jang besar, semangat jang bergelora, tetapi dengan penuh perhatian."

⁵¹ Baharudin Marasutan, 1949, p. 6. "Tiruan jang baik sadja dari seni lukis Barat."

the course of development for Indonesian artists. Sudjojono further argued in the publication that the Dutch had relinquished their jurisdiction over the existence of modern Indonesian painting. Retrospectively, Sudjojono asserted that PERSAGI was the forerunner of modern Indonesian painting in the 1930s. Furthermore, he delivered a scathing analogy, expressing that the Dutch failed to organize the life of Indonesian art. He claimed: "During the intervening three centuries, the Dutch were confined to educating Raden Saleh, and that was no accident."⁵²

The discourse surrounding the existence of Indonesian contemporary art expanded. Soemarno Soetosoendoro, an Indonesian writer and painter,⁵³ now supported Hopman's propositions. Soetosoendoro authored an extensive article titled "Seni Lukis Indonesia dalam Mentjari Djalan" (Indonesian Painting in Finding Its Path) in the November 1949 edition of the cultural magazine *Indonesia*. The document encompassed his discerning perspectives on advancements in contemporary Indonesian art. The speaker commenced by providing a detailed explanation of the development of indigenous Indonesian painting, highlighting its convergence with Western painting. In addition, he penned a concise elucidation of the advancements in painting throughout Western civilization.

In the subsequent segment, Soetosoendoro opined that the artworks created by Raden Saleh lacked authenticity as they merely emulated the artistic styles of Western painters. However, Soetosoendoro acknowledged that the participation of Indonesian painters in the Japanese military regime's propaganda led to a significant increase in development. An advantage of this era was that the painters garnered public recognition. However, following 1945 and until Soetosoendoro, Indonesian painters endeavored to find a path appropriate for their people's revolution.⁵⁴

⁵² DR Huyung's interview with S. Sudjojono in *Brochure Kesenian* (Yogyakarta: Kementrian Penerangan Republik Indonesia, 1949), p. 20.

⁵³ There is limited information on Soemarno Soetosoendoro. He is one of the founders of a cultural organization called *Himpunan Budaya Surakarta* (Surakarta Cultural Group, H.B.S.) and Murdowo in 1950s Solo. See Srihadi Sudarsono, *Saya dan Seni Lukis Indonesia*, makalah ceramah, Salihara Arts Center, 15 September 2015. Other sources state that Soetosoendoro taught art history at H.B.S. See Agus Dermawan T., *Dongeng dari Dullah*, (Jakarta: KPG, 2020), p.133. Another authority states that until the 1970s, as the head of H.B.S., Sumarno Soetosoendoro led a group exhibition in Solo. Several artists like Dullah, Kho Pok Gwan, Sumartono, and others participated in the show. See *Kedaulatan Rakjat*, 2 June 1971. On the other hand, there was no evidence to connect Hopman and Soetosoendoro.

⁵⁴ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, "Seni Lukis Indonesia dalam Mentjari Djalan" in *Indonesia*, TH.I, No. 10, November 1949, pp. 580-593.

Soetosoendoro continued with his most controversial writings. For example, he emphasized that the artistic endeavors of Indonesian painters, spanning from Raden Saleh to the era of Sudjojono, resembled "a collective of individuals ensnared in a dense forest, perplexed about finding their way back home." Using this analogy, Soetosoendoro was suggesting that Indonesian painting was in a state of confusion or disarray and was actively searching for a way to break free or find a solution. However, paradoxically, instead of returning to the past Indonesian painters opted for the Western painters' approach, which is characterized by greater dynamism.⁵⁵

Soetosoendoro's perspective offers an uncommon lens. He viewed the Western trajectory as challenging; despite its initial enthusiasm, it failed to deliver the soulful satisfaction that Indonesian artists seek. He employed an analogy to illustrate the irony by stating that contemporary Indonesian painters search for their inner essence while navigating seas of uncertainty. It is a journey that may not necessarily lead them to distinctly Indonesian characteristics in art. In contrast, Soetosoendoro suggested that countries like India, Japan, China, Cuba, Argentina, and Mexico have successfully cultivated a unique identity that stands apart from Western influences.⁵⁶

Through the comparisons, Soetosoendoro concluded that Indonesian painters "did not yet have enough power to forge their own path free from the various genres of Western painting." Furthermore, he perceived that Indonesian painters were plagued by a cognitive inclination to constantly emulate European events and occurrences.⁵⁷ Several Western painting genres, including impressionism, fauvism, surrealism, futurism, and cubism, significantly influenced Indonesian painting without encountering resistance. Regrettably, as stated by Soetosoendoro, this forceful assault resulted in a decline in the alertness of Indonesian painters. This is demonstrated by how the different genres of Indonesian painting could enter the "reception room" without being questioned about their reason for being there. Indonesian painters needed to be more discerning in assessing the influence of these contemporary Western art genres on their inner selves and their society. Soetosoendoro emphasized that these genres represent the culmination of Western art history, an experience that Indonesian painters have yet to encounter. Utilizing these genres in Indonesian painting has yet to result in the desired outcome of promoting harmony and progress; instead,

⁵⁵ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, 1949, p. 594.

⁵⁶ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, 1949, p. 595.

⁵⁷ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, 1949, p. 595.

it has led to a deviation from the intended path and an increase in disorder.⁵⁸ Like Hopman, Soetosoendoro concluded his article by stating that "our new painting is essentially a replication of Western painting."⁵⁹

One can easily envision how Soetosoendoro's scathing critique caused embarrassment among readers, particularly those involved in the art community. The editorial board of *Indonesia* deemed it essential to include an "editor's note" immediately following Soetosoendoro's article. The editors raised concerns regarding the terminology "imitation" and "Western painting" employed by Soetosoendoro.

The editors emphasized the importance of acknowledging the influence of Eastern art in the development of Western painting, mainly starting from impressionism, as mentioned by Soetosoendoro. Furthermore, the editors noted that fauvist painters openly and deliberately examined classical Eastern and primitive art. The editors stated, "Did Vincent van Gogh not also replicate elements from Japanese painting? Starting from Raden Saleh, Indonesian painters have employed a Western technique in their paintings rather than simply imitating or copying." The editors could not conceal their irritation towards Soetosoendoro's accusation regarding Indonesian painters imitating Western Art. The editors continue:

If it is indeed accurate that our painting is simply an imitation, what exactly is being imitated?" What is the technique? What is the method? What are the motifs? What are the characteristics? What are the shapes? If the act of imitation pertains to the soul, what is the definition of an Eastern and Western soul? Where is the boundary between "imitation" and "influence"? Wouldn't "influence" be more appropriate in this context?

The editors subsequently assured the readers of *Indonesia* that a distinguished painter would compose a counterargument against Soetosoendoro.⁶⁰

In November 1949, *Indonesia* fulfilled its promise by publishing a response from the painter Suromo. In the February 1950 edition titled "Tentang Lukisan" (About painting), Suromo opened his paragraph with an abstract discourse on the significance of art for artists and humanity. The

⁵⁸ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, 1949, p. 596.

⁵⁹ Soemarno Soetosoendoro, 1949, p. 597.

⁶⁰ Editor's Note, 1949, p. 598.

readers were encouraged to perceive art through the perspective of a creator or artist who possesses expertise in their work rather than solely relying on the viewpoint of an art critic.

According to Suromo, the spiritual experience that gives rise to artwork in an Indonesian setting is a significant factor for artists formulating their ideas and concepts regarding art. The artist's expression of their modernity is undeniably influenced by national awareness. Suromo attributed his character and artistic taste as an Indonesian artist to this awareness, which he also considered the present reality. Suromo concluded his extensive discussion on historical events and art ideology with a rebuttal directed towards Soetosoendoro and Hopman. He disputed the notion of the universality of Western art, which suggests its superiority over other forms of universal expression. In addition,

Indonesian painting did not copy Western Painting. It is true that European painting traditions heavily influenced the shaping of methods that are now international. Reversely, European methods are heavily influenced by colored tribes: Chinese, Japanese, Egypt, African, Little Asian, and others. So, the accusation that these international methods are Western has no basis.⁶¹

Interaction in the cultural field is unavoidable and natural. Currently, Suromo wrote, the influence of Western culture on art and life has penetrated and worsened the quality of Indonesian society. However, everyone must accept this fact. In the reality of mixed cultures, an artist must be able to develop “character,” “emotional truth,” and “ideas,” which then form the “Indonesian soul.”⁶²

In the April 1950 edition, *Indonesia* furthered the discourse by featuring Trisno Sumardjo's article ‘Seni Lukis Kita Bukan Tiruan’ (Our Painting Is Not Imitation). Sumardjo commenced his paragraphs by employing a satirical portrayal of the jungle, thereby contradicting the earlier stance taken by Soetosoendoro. Sumardjo described the jungle as a habitat

⁶¹ Suromo “Tentang Lukisan” in *Indonesia*, Th.II, No. 2, February 1950, p. 74. “Seni lukis Indonesia tidak mengkopi seni lukis Barat. Memang, tradisi kesenian Eropa banyak memengaruhi pembentukan cara-cara yang kini menjadi cara-cara internasional. Sebaliknya, cara-cara Eropa banyak terpengaruh dari cara-cara suku berwarna: Tiongkok, Jepang, Mesir, Negro, bangsa Asia kecil, dan lain sebagainya. Jadi, tuduhan bahwa cara internasional ini sesungguhnya adalah cara-cara Barat, tidak beralasan.”

⁶² Suromo, 1950, pp.74-75.

for numerous creatures exhibiting diverse behaviors. One of them is inevitably the creature that possesses superior knowledge and is more remarkable and esteemed than others. This sentiment emerged because the beast had an advanced education, perceiving itself as intellectually superior to its counterparts. The creature, characterized by its haughty demeanor, consistently boasted about its Western education.

Undoubtedly, the satire also extends to individuals who believe they can determine the trajectory of Indonesian culture based solely on their higher educational qualifications. Thus, Sumardjo emphasized the disparity in sociocultural existence resulting from the unequal distribution of education. The deterioration of this condition will be exacerbated if individuals who possess knowledge and education compromise their moral principles. According to Sumardjo, the absence of integrity towards the nation will lead people to develop a discriminatory mindset. Education has the potential to significantly alter an individual's character to the extent that it becomes detached from the essence of his or her nation. In this regard, Sumardjo emphasized that art is a distinct discipline, separate from other academic fields. Consequently, an advanced education in art does not guarantee the ability to become an artist.⁶³

Sumardjo persistently criticized Soetosoendoro, even delving into matters of a personal nature. Soetosoendoro's dual occupation as a painter and proprietor of an art supplies store resulted in his soul being likened to that of a merchant, mainly due to the store's provision of subpar paintings catering to tourist and domestic decorative purposes. "Inexpensive artworks pose a threat, inflict damage upon, and undermine the integrity of art and culture. The paintings merely soothe the nation, and only individuals lacking intelligence would purchase them," Sumardjo stated.⁶⁴ The paintings that "lull the nation," he continued are precisely those that merely offer the exoticism of Indonesia's nature and people. Such paintings deny the fact that Indonesia underwent a period of turbulence during its revolution.

Sumardjo also refuted Soetosoendoro's previous proposition: "Indonesian artists did not experience the history of how European art developed." Sumardjo believed this view reflected Soetosoendoro's poor understanding of art history:

⁶³ Trisno Sumardjo, "Seni Lukis Kita Bukan Tiruan" in *Indonesia*, TH. 2, No. 4, April 1950, pp. 195-196.

⁶⁴ Trisno Sumardjo, 1950, p. 203.

For Soetosoendoro, history is not history if it is not written in books. The Great Revolution happening around us apparently has no meaning to him and does not bring any change or awareness to his soul.⁶⁵

Sumardjo posed a forceful question, "Must we wait until the various events in art since 1945 be written down by Westerners first so that Soetosoendoro believes it? Is not the great revolution now occurring in Indonesia no less great than what has become history in European states? Is it not that Indonesian artists are now experiencing and fighting for their art? Why must our painters experience European art history first?" Sumardjo considered that Soetosoendoro did not have the capacity to understand his nation and had failed to understand the essence of reality.⁶⁶

He emphasized to Soetosoendoro that incorporating various Western art concepts into the Indonesian art scene is a simple task that anyone can accomplish. Furthermore, numerous publications on the subject have been released. Sumardjo stated that in Indonesia there is a greater need for writing that focuses on contemporary art practice, rather than simply rehashing what has already been written about modern art in Western books.

Sumardjo's arguments in defense against the accusation of imitating Western art closely align with the previously stated viewpoints of Sudjojono, Suromo, and Marasutan. They asserted that Eastern art had exerted a significant and enduring influence on Western art. Sumardjo challenged Soetosoendoro's claim that the art world is divided into "West and East" solely based on geographical factors. When considering the perspective of "art is universal," such a context is irrelevant. In addition, the issue is why Japanese and Chinese paintings, characterized by impressionistic qualities and serving as inspiration for French painters, are not referred to as "impressionistic." What is the reason for not categorizing Egyptian sculptures as surrealistic? Why are African and Oceanian "primitive" sculptures, which Picasso imitated, not referred to as expressionistic? Why are our wayang performances not described as impressionistic? Do these -

⁶⁵ Trisno Sumardjo, 1950, pp. 199-200. "Bagi Soetosoendoro sejarah tampaknya bukanlah sejarah kalau bukan ditulis ke dalam buku-buku. Revolusi Besar yang sedang terjadi di sekitar kita sekarang rupanya tidak berarti baginya, tidak memberi perubahan dan kesadaran sedikitpun ke dalam jiwanya."

⁶⁶ Trisno Sumardjo, 1950, pp. 199-200.

isms exclusively belong to the West?⁶⁷ Sumardjo concluded his article with numerous unresolved allegations.

From the debate above, I think Sumardjo, Suromo, and Sudjojono are proponents of moderate nationalism as opposed to radical nationalism, which rejects Western art and always considers or suggests that Indonesian classical art styles or forms are the only way to find their artistic identity. I do not have any examples of artists or critics to represent this category, although, to a certain extent, Soetosoendoro's thoughts are somewhat representative. The debate above also indicates an attempt to balance the tension relating to identity at that time. If Indonesian artists follow Western art, it is seen as imitating and not having an individual soul. Therefore, as suggested by Soetosoendoro and Hopman, returning to earlier "indigenous" or "classical" styles or forms is more reasonable. In this discussion, Sumardjo and Sudjojono disagreed that imitation is the right word, considering that this phenomenon occurs in various parts of world culture, such as European art, which the East has also inspired.

For Suromo, Sumardjo, and Sudjojono, the debates on the existence of Indonesian art were not just about asserting their own identity but about challenging the status quo. They opposed anyone, be it Dutch or Indonesian critics, who disowned the sovereignty of Indonesian artists who were in the process of strengthening their artistic identity. Nonetheless, their opposition was not aimed at fostering anti-Western sentiment but at fighting for the equality of Indonesian art in the international arena. Similarly, Dutch critics such as Verspoor and Admiraal, who were part of the debate, shared their goal of driving the discourse of decolonization in Indonesian art practice and advancing parity. Unfortunately, the canonical narratives do not acknowledge the unity and collaboration in their efforts.

Back to Jakarta: The Dispute Spreads

Claire Holt was the first author to appraise the distinctive characteristics in art between the two cities, Yogyakarta and Jakarta. However, she does not

⁶⁷ Trisno Sumardjo, 1950, p. 204. "Mengapa lukisan-lukisan Jepang dan Tiongkok yang njata-njata banjak jang impresionistis dan banjak ditiru pelukis-pelukis Prancis tidak disebut 'impresionistis'? Mengapa patung-patung Mesir tak disebut surealistis? Juga patung-patung Afrika dan Oceania jang 'primitif' serta ditiru Picasso itu tidak disebut ekspresionistik? Mengapa wayang-wayang kita tidak disebut impresionistik? Adakah isi isme-isme ini monopoli Barat?"

reveal that the context of the differences occurred due to the Second Dutch Military Aggression. She merely thought that, since the 1950s, Jakarta has become a space for a large market and a center for the development of science, a place for prominent arts and cultural institutions, and a location where opportunity and conflict occur. With such an environment, Jakarta artists' thinking is more cosmopolitan. Meanwhile, the artists in Yogyakarta have national pride because they feel they have inherited a glorious past whose traditions are still alive among them. Holt further stated that numerous artists in Yogyakarta perceive their art as "national," native, authentic, and typically Indonesian.⁶⁸

This sub-chapter aims to expand upon and address the gaps left by Holt by offering a contextual understanding of the distinctions between the Jakarta and Yogyakarta Schools, which emerged from the debates between S. Sudjojono and Trisno Sumardjo. Additionally, it acknowledges the significant influence of the Second Dutch Military Aggression as a catalyst for these developments.

The debate between Sudjojono and Sumardjo originated from the idea of "returning to Realism," which Sumardjo subsequently referred to as "Sudjojono's Realism." Sudjojono advocated realism in technique and theme as a prerequisite for being recognized as an artist. He argued that realism is essential in a society undergoing a revolution, unlike abstract painting, which is merely decorative, serving its own purpose. Meanwhile, Sumardjo placed high importance on the autonomy of artists. He accused Sudjojono of engaging in a covert mission in alliance with practical politics, particularly with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), due to Sudjojono's affiliation with communism and his alignment with the communists. Sumardjo, who held anti-communist views, further alleged that Sudjojono exhibited authoritarian tendencies by seeking to impose specific conditions on artistic practices.

Sudjojono rebutted Sumardjo's allegations, particularly regarding the correlation between the "return to realism" concept and the PKI political campaign. Sudjojono derisively opined that Sumardjo's assault not only lacked pertinence but also exhibited excessive personalization. Sudjojono cautioned Sumardjo about the ramifications of the responsibilities held by artists during the revolutionary era. Artists ought not only to contemplate

⁶⁸ See Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp.215 – 232, pp. 244-253.

art, but also to incorporate politics into their work." I would prefer to be a regular human being rather than an artist who lacks political involvement and a sense of accountability for the fate of humanity. Hence, I am not merely engaged in the revolution, but am also actively involved in shaping its trajectory." Sudjojono prioritizes the call for revolution over the call for painting, stating, "In the pursuit of independence, I must abandon my pencil and instead take up a gun."⁶⁹

The Conflict Spreads: The New Map Reveals

An in-depth analysis of the Sudjojono and Sumardjo debate is crucial as my research has revealed that the controversy between the two founders of SIM has been insufficiently addressed in art historical studies. The year in which this debate occurred was inaccurately recorded. Agus Burhan, for example, stated that "Sudjojono initiated the concept of social realism in 1953 by advocating for a 'return to realism'."⁷⁰ The term "return to realism" is a well-known term in the history of modern Indonesian art, used not only by Burhan, Sanento Yuliman, and Trisno Sumardjo, but also seemingly referencing Sudjojono's 1949 interview in *Brochure Kesenian*. However, I propose a slight alteration, using the term "progression to realism." This choice is based on the description on the cover of the 1950 *Mimbar Indonesia* magazine, which I believe provides a more nuanced and accurate representation of the artistic movement.

Helena Spanjaard's dissertation contains distinct pages titled "Het debat over de Indonesische kunst: Sumardjo en Sudjojono" (the Debate on Indonesian Art: Sumardjo and Sudjojono). However, Spanjaard failed to provide any information regarding the origins or context of the discussion. Moreover, the Sudjojono vs. Sumardjo debate shifted to another topic when Spanjaard introduced J. Hopman, who is not pertinent to this discussion.⁷¹

⁶⁹ S. Sudjojono "Sudjojono tentang Sudjojono" in *Mimbar Indonesia*, 19 August 1950, pp. 21-22. "Saja lebih baik djadi manusia biasa daripada seniman zonder politik, daripada seniman zonder rasa tanggungdjawab atas nasib manusia jang ada kebetulan di sudut dunia ini jg orang katakan bangsa Indonesia. Saja turut revolusi. Saja tidak turut sadja, tapi djuga turut menetapkan revolusi ini harus kemana. Revolusi dalam arti tidak membantu dalam djalan kesenian sadja, tapi kalau musuh sudah terlalu dekat rumah, dan ini rumah merdeka jang penghabisan di Indonesia, dan saja tidak kober lagi untuk melukis, saja harus lempar pensel saja, atas nama kemerdekaan terpaksa mengambil bedil dan pamit kepada istri saja."

⁷⁰ See M. Agus Burhan, 2013, pp. 94-95. This error occurred because Burhan referred to Trisno Sumardjo's texts, published in 1953, namely "The Position of Our Painting."

⁷¹ See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, pp.124-130.

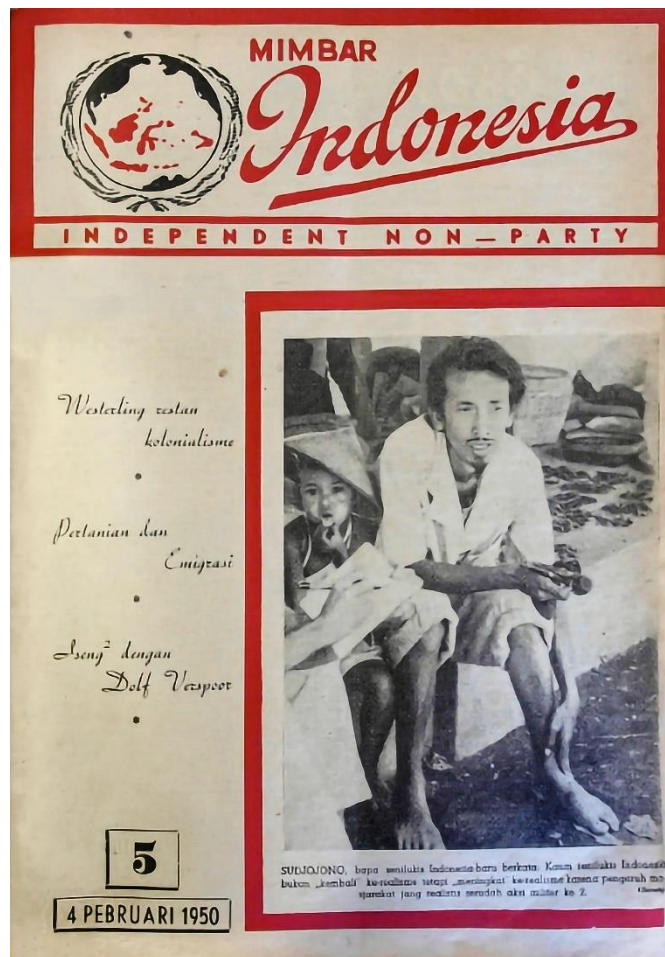


Figure.7.10.
The cover of *Mimbar Indonesia* magazine shows Sudjojono and his son Tedjabayu sitting at a market stall.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

As discussed earlier, the Hopman and Sudjojono case occurred within another context. Sanento Yuliman is currently the only art historian who provides the contextual details of the debate between Sumardjo and Sudjojono. Yuliman contends that the emergence of the "return to realism" concept was closely linked to the societal transformations that took place following the Second Dutch Military Aggression. Yuliman stated that this incident compelled Sudjojono to resort to violence instead of pursuing his artistic endeavors. He enlisted in the guerrilla militia alongside the army. He directly observed the heinous acts and anguish that individuals experienced as a result of war, which influenced his perspective on reality and led him to express it through art.⁷²

⁷² Sanento Yuliman, *Keindonesiaan, Kerakyatan dan Modernisme dalam Kritik Seni Lukis di Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Gang Kabel, 2021), pp. 107-108.

Yuliman appears to have been alluding to the texts written by Trisno Sumardjo. Sumardjo, in the article, disclosed the reason behind Sudjojono's transformation following his involvement in a guerrilla war during the Second Aggression, which subsequently led to a heated debate between the two. Sumardjo stated that Sudjojono was deeply moved by the circumstances he witnessed and personally endured: the plight of the people, their suffering, their struggle, and the torment they endured. He possessed a firearm himself, his biological father was murdered, his personal artworks were misplaced, and one of his sculptures was casually attacked by Dutch army.⁷³

Interestingly, the repercussions of military aggression had a significant effect on Sudjojono's life, which garnered attention at a national level. Sudjojono's photograph was featured on the front cover of the 4 February 1950 issue by the editorial board of *Mimbar Indonesia*. Sudjojono and his young son Tedjabayu were depicted sitting in a market stall in the picture. The caption under the photo reads as follows: "Sudjojono, the father of the new Indonesian painting, declared: Indonesian painters are not *returning* to realism but *progressing* to realism because of the influence of society that has become realistic after the Second Military Action." (Fig.7.10).

The commotion about the concept of "returning to realism" broke out in late 1949 when the *Brochure Kesenian* published an interview between Hoe Yong and Sudjojono. Hoe Yong was a Korean film director who was actively involved in advancing the post-war Indonesian film industry. During the Japanese era, he worked for *Sendenbu*, and after the war, he preferred to stay in Indonesia. To Hoe Yong, Sudjojono explained his new art conception:

Why did I go to Realism? Realism makes me more real. If people take Yogya, I want to seize the real Yogya. If I want to eat, I must eat rice. Real rice. If I seize sovereignty, I want real sovereignty. Symbolism? I do not want. [It is] Not full (satisfying), not real. European painting, before the Renaissance, was also primitive. However, Europe after the Renaissance adhered to realism. In the end, these isms are just a tool to talk. Realism cannot make Indonesian painting bad.⁷⁴

⁷³ Trisno Sumardjo, "Realisme Sudjojono", 1950.

⁷⁴ *Brochure Kesenian*, Kementerian Penerangan Republik Indonesia, Yogyakarta, 1949, p. 19. "Apa sebab saja pergi ke Realisme? Realisme buat saja lebih *reel*. Kalau Jogja diambil orang, saja mau rebut *reel* Jogja. Kalau saya tidak makan, saja mesti makan nasi. *Reel* nasi. Kalau saja rebut kedaulatan, saya mau *reel* kedaulatan. *Symbolisch* tidak mau. Tidak kenjang, tidak njata. Seni lukis Eropa, sebelum renaissance, djuga primitief. Tapi Eropa sesudah *renaissance*, menganut *realistisch*. Achirnja *ism* itu,

Sudjojono not only emphasized his stance toward Realism. He also criticized a then current phenomenon in which, according to him, a group of painters (whom he did not name) painted in an abstract style. He recognized that this group of abstract painters had the ideology of "art for art's sake," as opposed to "art for revolution," which supported the spirit of national revolution and was more needed. Sudjojono then reminded his artist colleagues that the ideology of "art for art's sake" must be critically examined because it was shaped by the context of space, time, and place in Europe. As a result, "art for art's sake" could not be simply applied in Indonesia. Rather than painting with abstract works, Indonesian painters deserve to present Indonesian society's reality and problems.

Hence, painting with realistic techniques became relevant, and a person exhibiting that skill deserved to be called a painter. Why is this requirement essential? Sudjojono stated that people (*Rakyat*) need works of art that they can understand. He argued that realistic paintings, in theme and technique, are more accessible for people to understand. In contrast, abstract paintings have limitations because they only serve personal desires and confuse people because they have no clear meaning. Sudjojono therefore argued that the appropriate way forward for modern Indonesian art was to return to realism based on Indonesian social reality.⁷⁵

After examining numerous sources, I found that the shift in Sudjojono's concept of art from Expressionism to Realism immediately became controversial among artists. On the one hand, they felt the bitterness of the mentor who was facing a new phase of life after the military aggression.⁷⁶ But, on the other hand, they worried about the shift in power that would result from this. Because the statement was made by Sudjojono, it was not just any unimportant statement considering his influential leadership since the pre-war period. Not only was he honored, he also served as a mentor for many painters. Moreover, in early October 1949, Trisno Sumardjo inaugurated him as the "Father of Indonesian Modern Painting." The inauguration, which Sumardjo wrote about in *Mimbar Indonesia*, did not raise any objections from artists, and signified their approval.⁷⁷ As the "father,"

hanya suatu alat untuk berkata. Realisme 'ta dapat bikin buruk seni lukis Indonesia."

⁷⁵ *Brochure Kesenian*, Kementerian Penerangan Republik Indonesia, Yogyakarta, 1949, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁶ "Sudjojono Mau Makan Nasi yang Reel, Symbolisch tidak Kenyang!" in *Merdeka*, 28 Januari 1950, p.17.

⁷⁷ Trisno Sumardjo, "Sudjojono: Bapak Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru" in *Mimbar Indonesia*, 8 and 15 October 1949.

Sudjojono was expected to encourage the atmosphere of diversity in the practice of art. Some artists were disappointed with Sudjojono's change in artistic views, and Trisno Sumardjo was no exception.

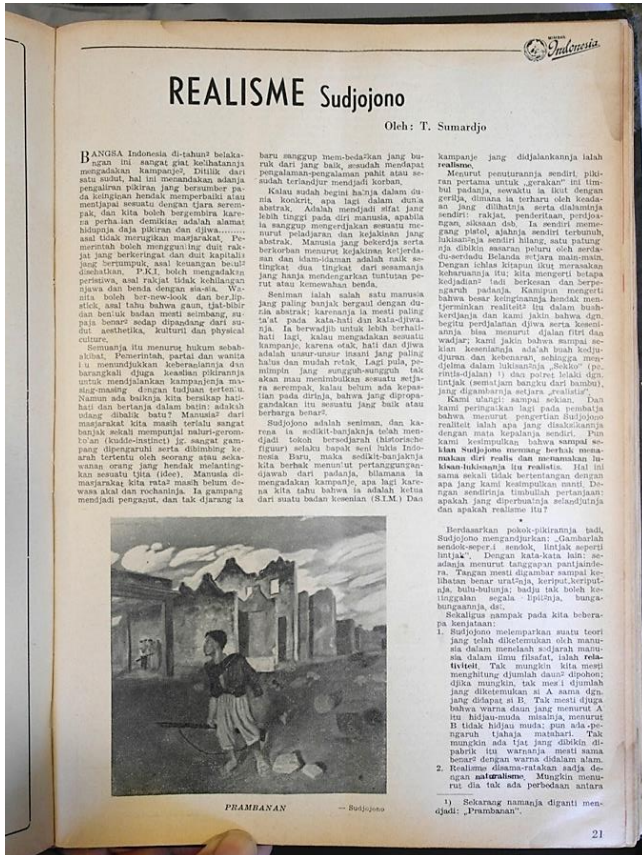


Figure.7.11.
Trisno Sumardjo, *Realisme Sudjojono*, 1950.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

In an essay titled *Realisme Sudjojono* (Sudjojono's Realism), published on 20 May 1950 in *Mimbar Indonesia*, Sumardjo expressed his opposition to the "return to realism" movement (Fig.7.11). It is necessary to analyze Sumardjo's opening paragraphs independently, as this particular section has not received attention from Sanento Yuliman, Helena Spanjaard, or other historians. Sumardjo initially described the post-war Indonesian political scene as being in a state of upheaval due to recent changes. Indonesian individuals and communities were inundated with campaigns that pledged to enhance their social and economic well-being. Sumardjo explicitly referred to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in his explanation. However, he

omitted any reference to alternative political factions. He did not directly associate Sudjojono's "realism" movement with the party. Nevertheless, it is adequate to guide the reader in discovering a connection between "Sudjojono's realism" and the "political interests" of PKI. Sumardjo suspected that a concealed political agenda drove Sudjojono's realism campaign due to his affiliation with a communist organization.⁷⁸

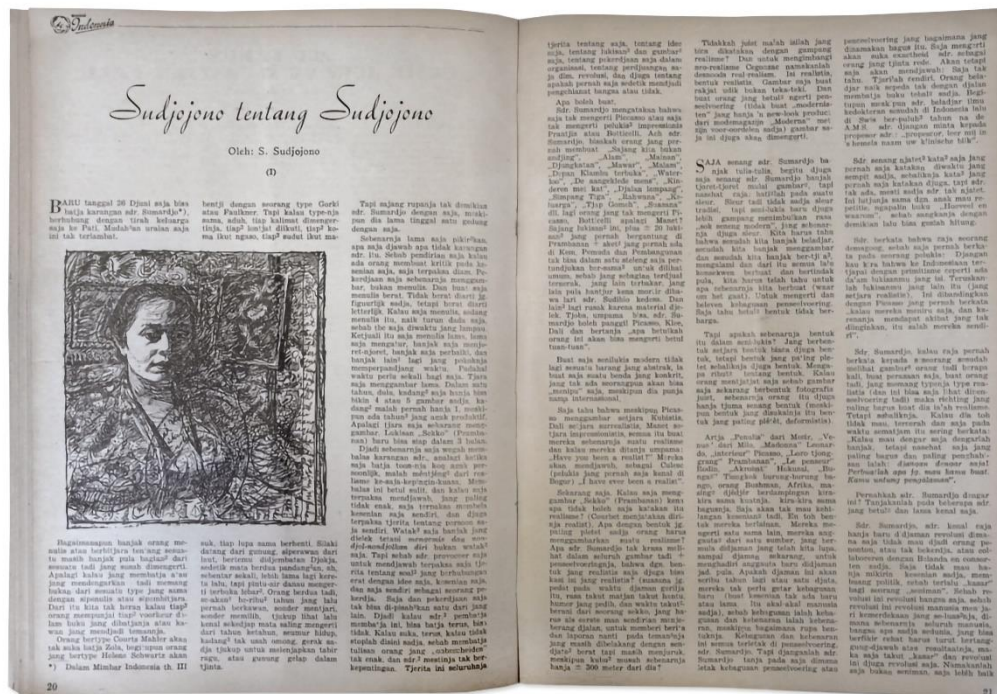


Figure 7.12.
S. Sudjojono, *Sudjojono tentang Sudjojono*, 1950.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

Sumardjo, in his critique, reiterates the call for diversity in artistic expression, a value that Sudjojono's critique of painters lacking technical mastery seems to undermine. According to Sumardjo, "realism" should not be the sole criterion for attaining the status of an artist. Sumardjo insists that Sudjojono should not force others into the same mold or exert control over the art scene, even if he chooses "realism" as his artistic goal.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Trisno Sumardjo, "Realisme Sudjojono", 1950, p. 21.

⁷⁹ In his letter to H.B. Jassin, Sumardjo regretted the change in Sudjojono's attitude. According to him, "Sudjojono's attitude is actually neo-fascist." See "Trisno Sumardjo's letter to H.B. Jassin", 11 February 1950, Archives of the Documentation Center H.B. Jassin Jakarta, Trisno Sumardjo folder.

After two months, *Mimbar Indonesia* released an extensive rejoinder authored by Sudjojono, titled "Sudjojono Tentang Sudjojono" (Sudjojono on Sudjojono) (Fig. 7.12).⁸⁰ In this article, he elucidates the rationales supporting a "progression to realism." He stressed that the concept was closely tied to his experience as an Indonesian actively participating in his nation's revolution. Consequently, he was summoned to develop his initial idea further, drawing from his groundbreaking expertise.

In response to Sumardjo's proposition that the "return to realism" should be applied to Sudjojono himself, Sudjojono acknowledged, "I was indeed looking for myself, I was looking for my self-expression."⁸¹ Nevertheless, Sudjojono could not refute that he had a foot in art as "self-expression" and "art for serving the people." The intertwining of artistic expression and societal dynamics is an inseparable aspect of his life, which he considers to be of the utmost significance.

Sudjojono felt his ambiguity in assessing the social reality. He wrote, "even though I hate today's society, I also love it." People are like granite, claimed Sudjojono; he hated the hardness of the stone's surface. However, with love, Sudjojono would continue to carve, sculpt, and rub the stone until it brings out its aesthetic value as art, both for those who see it now and those who will see it in the future. Sudjojono argued that the significance of an artist creating art is from the "people's perspective," not only from the artist's point of view. If artists and society develop balance, a powerful coalition will be formed: art that indicates the character of the new Indonesia.⁸²

Sudjojono believed that the progress of Indonesian art could not be achieved in isolation but instead required the active involvement [of the artist] with the community. These thoughts are the foundation for his concept of "progression to realism." However, he felt that post-revolutionary Indonesian society was still naïve and limited in its ability to appreciate a work of art. He believed: "My society is a society that can only understand easy reality. The people do not understand the reality of heaven. Their reality is the 'reality of rice'. A priest's theory is just a theory, but rice to eat is more

⁸⁰ S. Sudjojono, "Sudjojono tentang Sudjojono", *Mimbar Indonesia*, 19 and 26 August 1950.

⁸¹ S. Sudjojono, "Sudjojono tentang Sudjojono", *Mimbar Indonesia*, 26 August 1950, p. 21.

⁸² S. Sudjojono, 1950, p. 22. "Meskipun saja bentji masjarakat sekarang, tapi saja juga tjinta pada masjarakat tadi. Kalau masjarakat tadi umpama granit, meskipun saja bentji pada kerasnja, saja tatah, saja pahat, saja patjal dia saban hari, saja lihat, saja gosok, saja patjal pula berbulan2, sambil maki, sambil gembira, lusa atau besok, tetapi sekarang zeker dalam kenang2an, akan mendjadi dia bentuk jang bagus, dimana saja akan gembira, tetapi djuga dimana tiap2 pelihat akan dapat hidup bahagia. Faktor ini buat saja betul besar."

necessary." Within that framework, realist rather than abstract paintings would be easier to accommodate people's understanding of art.⁸³

The debate between Sumardjo and Sudjojono is extensive in scope. It is therefore crucial to analyze the connection between Trisno Sumardjo's criticism of "Sudjojono's Realism" and the exhibition of the Yogyakarta painters, which took place in early May 1950 and was supported by the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia. This exhibition showcases the government's aims to encourage the public to delve into the significance of the Indonesian revolution through contemporary art.⁸⁴



Figure.7.13.
Dullah, *Persiapan Gerilya*, 1949.

Collection of Presidential Palace of Indonesia

Several paintings depict battle scenes or guerrilla gangs preparing for the battlefield, such as the artwork titled *Persiapan Gerilya* (Guerrilla Preparation) by Dullah (Fig.7.13). Notably, Sudjojono's painting titled *Sekko* (The Vanguard) is particularly striking. This artwork later gained fame as a representative of that era (Fig.7.15). Harijadi Sumodidjojo's realist painting, *Biografi Malioboro III* (The Malioboro's Biography Part III) (Fig.7.16)," is replete with the artist's discerning contemplations on the progression of the war of independence.

⁸³ S. Sudjojono, 1950, p. 22. "Masjaraikat saja ialah masjaraikat jang baru bisa mengerti realitet jang gampang. Realitet langit dia tidak ngerti. Realitet dia adalah realitet nasi. Dia djuga barangkali kali ngerti kalau (sesuatu) itu chajal(an), tapi kalau anak bininja lapar, dia akan merampok. Teori kjai tinggal teori, nasi sih perlu."

⁸⁴ See "Steleng Seni Lukis 1 – 10 May", exhibition catalog, Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia, 1950. The artists participating in this exhibition are Abdul Salam, Harijadi S., Hendra Gunawan, Kartono Yudhokusumo, Koesnadi, Ramli, Rusli, Setjojoso, Sudibio, S. Sudjojono, Sumitro, Surono, Suromo, Sucipto, and Trubus Sudarsono.



Figure.7.14.
Harijadi Sumodidjojo, *Biografi Malioboro III*, 1949.

Collection of Presidential Palace of Indonesia
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar



Figure.7.15.
S. Sudjojono, *Sekko*, 1949.

Collection of Presidential Palace of Indonesia
(Source: <https://indoartnow.com/artists/dullah>)

Harijadi, for instance, does not portray the upsurge of revolution but instead explores other sinister aspects. He emphasized the perplexity of the procedure that affected the soldiers, who were observed carrying pistols at their waists, the needy individuals with ruffians afflicted by ulcers on their bodies, the middle class, and subsequently, the youthful individuals engaging in dancing. Harijadi immersed himself in the canvas, experiencing a state of vertigo or an inability to suppress his confusion. Harijadi's painting effectively

depicted the Indonesian realism envisioned by Sudjojono. Based on their paintings, it is evident that Dullah, Sudjojono, and Harijadi view the revolution as a profound exploration of human nature rather than merely a violent conflict or a strategic pursuit of victory through diplomacy. These messages are highly assertive.

An unidentified author (N.N.) assessed the *Steleng Seni Lukis* exhibition in *Mimbar Indonesia*. The text titled “Antara Seni dan Masyarakat” (Between Art and the Society) fervently endorsed Sudjojono's concept of realism. The author highlighted that realism embodies the essence of the independence movement, effectively using the exhibition to affirm Indonesian identity.⁸⁵ While not all the paintings in the exhibition explicitly convey the emotions associated with the struggle for independence, viewers can still discern the essence of the Indonesian people. In addition, N.N. argued that the exhibition has successfully put forth a crucial proposition: “authentic art serves as a reflection of society.” N.N. subsequently examines the notion of a “return to realism” by asserting that Sudjojono's change in perspective can be comprehended in light of the unfortunate events that occurred in the mentor's life, as well as the experiences of other painters like Harijadi and Rusli. The author also cited an additional motive for Sudjojono's transition. Amidst the aggression, Sudjojono experienced a sense of betrayal by his fellow painters.⁸⁶ Regrettably, N.N. failed to provide a more comprehensive description of the traitors. Nevertheless, it is evident that betrayal had prompted N.N. to declare that painting necessitated a novel perspective.

With his essay titled “Bahaya Seteling Realisme Jogja” (The Dangers of the Yogya Realism Exhibition), Oesman Effendi critically assessed the exhibition. He substituted the term “Sudjojono Realism” with “Yogyakarta Realism,” leading to the widespread adoption of this term to delineate the distinctiveness of Yogyakarta.⁸⁷ Effendi characterized it as “an aesthetic movement that Yogyakarta painters admired due to the influence of the charismatic guru: S. Sudjojono.”⁸⁸

I must stop here to emphasize and bridge significant contextual matters that help reveal Effendi's writing complications. I argue that Effendi stimulated the distinction between factions in the Indonesian art scene,

⁸⁵ N.N., “Antara Seni dan Masyarakat: Para Pelukis dan Anak Zamannja”, *Mimbar Indonesia*, 13 May 1950, p. 17.

⁸⁶ N.N., 1950, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Oesman Effendi, “Bahaya Seteling Realisme Jogja”, *Indonesia*, No. 5., TH.II., My 1950, pp. 258-268.

⁸⁸ Oesman Effendi, 1950, p. 260.

mainly when he changed "Sudjojono's Realism" employing the new term "Yogya Realism" – or, in the broad sense, the "Yogya school" – referring to the artistic paradigm of artists from the city that was once the epicenter of the revolution.

In addition, the Yogya School was strongly influenced by the enduring legacy of "Sudjojono's Realism," intersected with several artists who worked as lecturers at the Indonesian Academy of Fine Art (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia – ASRI). When ASRI was inaugurated in January 1950, one of its authoritative lecturers was Hendra Gunawan – a key figure who also served as the school's co-founder. In 1947, together with Affandi and Sudarso, Hendra founded *Pelukis Rakjat* (People's Painters), an artist collective whose motto is "not art for art's sake but art for the people"⁸⁹ and whose spirit is still in line with "Sudjojono's realism." In the 1950s, Hendra was closely associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia – PKI) and even admitted to being a communist despite not being a member of the party.⁹⁰ In addition, the Yogya School was also strengthened by the members of SIM.⁹¹ I argue that the other faction depicted in Effendi's writings is Jakarta, which is, to some extent, represented by artists and critics such as Trisno Sumardjo and Effendi himself.

In the subsequent paragraphs, Effendi reminds the readers of the perils of using realism in painting. Nonetheless, he predicted that the term realism was a transient trend in the evolution of Indonesian art. Effendi hypothesized that contextual sensibilities drove the Yogyakarta painters' preference for realism. As a result, he firmly believes that realist-style paintings will undergo ongoing transformation. Effendi then directed his criticism at Sudjojono by challenging the justifications for why realism is needed to serve as the standard while it has no cultural basis. He stated that for a long time, Indonesian art had assimilated numerous non-realist forms, such as wayang and batik. Effendi concluded that those who enforce realism as the official form of new Indonesian art engage in a dangerous act as it suppresses diversity.⁹²

⁸⁹ "Candidaten P.K.I. en partijlozen" in *Indische courant voor Nederland*, 26 August 1954, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Willem Mooyman "De volksschilders wonen aan de rand van Jogja en Affandi is nu bij hen" in *De nieuwsgier*, 9 September 1954, p. 3.

⁹¹ For SIM, see Chapter Six.

⁹² Interestingly, since Trisno Sumardjo took issue with it, the appeal of "Sudjojono's realism" is still being discussed decades later. See, among others, D. Sudiana, "Sudjojono's Realism," *Pikiran Rakjat*, 2 April 1980 and Kevin Chua, "Courbet after Sudjojono," *Art History*, April 2018, Vol. 41 Issue 2, pp. 292-317.

The skeptical perspective towards “Sudjojono's Realism” persisted until the mid-1950s. Trisno Sumardjo, for example, continued to raise this matter while evaluating the Harijadi solo exhibition in Jakarta. Harijadi's display of realist paintings was believed to be influenced by the communal existence of painters in Yogyakarta. The outcome of this collectivism resulted in the artist's work featuring political motifs. According to Sumardjo, Harijadi's paintings with a popular theme are created from excessive pathos, and are too far-fetched. This all happened because, apart from the fact that they both lived in Yogyakarta, Harijadi was strongly influenced by Sudjojono. Sumardjo stressed: "As a result of living in groups in Yogyakarta, Harijadi was very much affected by Sudjojono, who echoed his ideas on Realism in recent years." Thus, Sumardjo advised Harijadi to distance himself from Sudjojono's influence due to the lack of advantages provided by his realism concepts.⁹³

The movement of artists from one city to another and the debates between them - in this case through Sumardjo versus Sudjojono - created new factions of artistic development, especially in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. Claire Holt described it very well by writing that Yogyakarta artists have a sense of authentic national pride because they are heirs to a glorious past whose tradition is still alive in their midst. It makes sense that this feeling has possessed artists, believing their works are more typically Indonesian and represent their people. So, realism in painting became relevant to make it easier for people to understand art rather than abstract art, which was not in harmony with the perception of people undergoing a revolution.⁹⁴

From Jakarta Trisno Sumardjo and Oesman Effendi objected to this standardization and formed opposing factions. Given Jakarta's status as a metropolis and its diverse population and cultural background, artists in Jakarta possess broader perspectives on art and dynamics. In the 1950s, especially since the government moved back from Yogyakarta, Jakarta was a city that offered many career opportunities for artists. Most of the national magazines and newspapers, like the cultural institutions, have their offices in this city. Therefore, as Claire Holt noted during her research in 1955-1957, Jakarta was a cultural hub with influences that radiated across the entire country. These influences significantly impacted the life and work of artists

⁹³ Trisno Sumardjo, “Pameran Lukisan Harijadi” in *Siasat*, 9 May 1956, p. 25. “Sebagai akibat hidup berkelompok di Djogja, Harijadi banjak sekali terpengaruh Sudjojono jang dalam tahun2 belakangan ini menggemakan ide realismenja.”

⁹⁴ Claire Holt, 1967, p. 215.

in other cities. In addition, Jakarta was a place for the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Council for National Culture (Badan Musjawarat Kebudayaan Nasional - BMKN), and the Institute for People's Culture (Lembaga Budaya Rakyat - LEKRA), which played a crucial role in facilitating this cultural exchange at that time.⁹⁵

“The National Cultural Cold War”

The debate on Indonesianness in painting, which began between Trisno Sumardjo and Sudjojono, as discussed above, has evolved and expanded over the years. What was once a personal discourse has become a broader institutional discussion, a cornerstone in Indonesian art historiography. It is now the “Fine Art-ITB (Bandung School) versus the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts (Indonesian Fine Arts Academy - ASRI or Yogya School).” The critique of the Bandung School's Westernized, pro-American approach, promoting abstract painting and ideas detached from the Indonesian reality, was countered by the Yogya School's realistic tendencies, seen as a proud reflection of the national revolution, advocating for independence, opposing imperialism, and preserving the national identity.

The debate on Indonesianness during that time was under the shadows of the Cultural Cold War (CCW), a significant element of the broader Cold War conflict. The CCW was a complex cultural and ideological conflict involving the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies in the Western and Eastern Blocs. It encompassed a wide range of cultural expressions, such as literature, art, and music, all of which played a pivotal role in promoting the ideologies and values of the parties involved, shaping the cultural landscape of the time. At the national level, conflicts emerged between artists from different factions, with each clique accusing the other of aligning with one of the blocs. While numerous publications have explored specific issues related to the CCW in Indonesia, such as literature, film, performing arts, cultural institutions, and cultural networks⁹⁶, the debate surrounding the fine arts has often been overlooked.

⁹⁵ Claire Holt, 1967, p. 246.

⁹⁶ There are many publications on the topic of the Cultural Cold War. See, for example, Yuka Moriguchi Tsuchiya, *Science, Technology and the Cultural Cold War in Asia: From Atoms for Peace to Space Flight*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2022); Anselm Franke (ed.), *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Sternberg Press, 2021); Tony Day and Maya Liem H.T. (ed.), *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-*

Was the conflict between Fine Art-ITB and ASRI transpired? Jim Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman wrote in a pessimistic tone that the causes of the dispute between the Fine Art-ITB and ASRI were never clearly revealed because of the confusion about the basic principles of art creation. It is almost impossible to understand the roots of the dispute. Supangkat and Yuliman continued, "What happened was only sarcasm, criticism and insults. Bandung is insulted with the scorn of cheese artists who wear ties everywhere. Meanwhile, Yogyakarta was criticized as a failed educator because it had no theoretical basis, even though neither of them came to a conclusion about Indonesian art."⁹⁷ Supangkat and Yuliman's viewpoints may be reasonably justified, but their arguments would benefit greatly from additional elaboration. What was the real story, and how did the controversy start? This section will not provide complete answers to these questions. Instead, it briefly examines the debate to sharpen the historical context and explore sources that canonical narratives leave out.

I will start the discussion by examining Helena Spanjaard as one of the art historians who popularized the Fine Art-ITB and ASRI debates, especially with her article "The Controversy between the Academies of Bandung and Yogyakarta."⁹⁸ She explains the factors contributing to the dispute between the two factions. She started by comparing three paintings by Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, and Ahmad Sadali. According to her, the first two paintings were representative of the Yogyakarta Fine Arts

Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968, (California: Stanford University Press, 2008); and Jennifer Lindsay and Maya H.T. Sutedja Liem, *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011). See also Yiqing Li "Art diplomacy: Drawing China-Indonesia relations in the early Cold War, 1949-1956" in *Modern Asian Studies*, 2023-11, Vol.57 (6), Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp.1707-1742; Giles Scott-Smith "Ivan Kats, the Obor Foundation, and Indonesia: Reframing Cold War Cultural Diplomacy" in *Leidschrift*, jaargang 34, nummer 3, October 2019, pp. 69-86; Giles Scott-Smith "Liminal Liberalism? Ivan Kats, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the Obor Foundation in Cold War Indonesia" in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2022, Vol. 57(4), pp. 1051-1071; and Agus Suwignyo "The American influence in Indonesian teacher training, 1956-1964" in *History of Education (Tavistock) - Journal of the History of Education Society*, Vol.46 (5), 2017, pp. 653-673.

⁹⁷ Jim Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman, *G. Sidharta Di Tengah Seni Rupa Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Gramedia, 1982), p. 27. "Yang terjadi hanya lontaran sindiran, kritik sampai cacian. Bandung disodok dengan cibiran seniman keju yang pakai dasi ke mana-mana; sedangkan Yogyakarta disindir sebagai pendidik meleset karena tak punya dasar teori. Padahal keduanya sama-sama tak sampai pada sebuah kesimpulan tentang seni rupa Indonesia."

⁹⁸ Another Spanjaard article that also discusses this issue is "Bandung, Laboratorium Barat?" See Helena Spanjaard "Bandung, Laboratorium Barat?" in Joseph Fischer (ed.), *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945-1990*, (Jakarta-New York: Panitia Pameran KIAS and Festival of Indonesia, 1990), pp. 204-209. Spanjaard also examined the issue in her 1998 doctoral thesis, *Het ideaal van een Moderne Indonesische Schilderkunst 1900-1995: De creatie van een nationale culturele identiteit*, pp. 133 – 169.

Academy, while the final painting depicted the Bandung School. The two schools of thought are juxtaposed by providing a detailed account of the origins and establishment of the academy. Following Claire Holt's footsteps, Spanjaard subsequently surveyed the distinctive features of Indonesian art in three urban centers: Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Jakarta. She then recounted various art exhibitions, focusing on the 1954 exhibition of works by Fine Art-ITB students in Jakarta. This event, which garnered significant attention, was met with criticism from Trisno Sumardjo, intensifying its controversy.⁹⁹

Upon perusing Spanjaard's article, I identified various elemental issues left unaddressed. She suggests, for instance, that Sudjojono was part of the art academy (ASRI), which is inaccurate. Sudjojono never taught at ASRI. Meanwhile, Hendra Gunawan is quite relevant because he joined the campus and assisted in founding ASRI. In another context as mentioned by Spanjaard, Trisno Sumardjo, who expressed disapproval of the exhibition organized by the Bandung students, aligned more closely with the "Jakarta faction" rather than representing ASRI. Additionally, Spanjaard's sources of the debate concentrate exclusively on the critique by Trisno Sumardjo and Sitor Situmorang, who also reviewed the 1954 Bandung Exhibition. As I will explain below, Sumardjo and Situmorang criticized the Fine Art-ITB. Sudjoko, a student at Fine Art-ITB at the time, and a writer named Eddy shared the critic's response. Unfortunately, their reactions were never included in this issue.

The evidence presented below strongly suggests that there is no actual controversy between Fine Art-ITB and ASRI, and it is undoubtedly not a confrontation as is commonly believed. Instead, what happened is a broader issue concerning more than only these two organizations. The debate involved Fine Art-ITB, Jakarta's art critics, and specific painters from Yogyakarta who were associated with artist collectives such as SIM and Pelukis Rakjat. Some of these painters also held teaching positions at ASRI. The controversy extended to the Institute for People's Culture (Lembaga Budaya Rakyat, LEKRA), which advocated a populist ideology linked to the Indonesian Communist Party (Indonesian Communist Party, PKI). LEKRA promoted social realism, unlike the Fine Art-ITB, which was recognized for its abstract paintings and its affiliation with America due to the grants it received. The stark dichotomy between the two reflected the global aesthetic

⁹⁹ Helena Spanjaard, "The Controversy between the Academies Bandung and Yogyakarta" in John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art*, (NSW: Wild Peony, 1993), pp. 85-104. See also Helena Spanjaard, 1998, pp. 133-169.

dispute between America's abstract expressionism and the Soviet Union's Social Realism.

LEKRA's founding has cultural roots and can be traced far back to when certain intellectuals debated which model suited Indonesian culture, West or East, in the 1930s. A literary scholar, Achdiat K. Mihadja, called it "Cultural Polemics."¹⁰⁰ Claire Holt extended the discussion from the 1930s to the Cultural Cold War period in her book and packaged it as "The Great Debate."¹⁰¹ In the 1930s, intellectuals such as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, Sutan Sjahrir, Ki Hajar Dewantara, M. Amir, Sanoesi Pane, and several others debated the direction of Indonesian cultural identity, whether to embrace Western modernity or to look back to Indonesian classics. In the subsequent period, this subject develops into various issues such as national culture, national character, education, etc. Because cultural identity was seen as a significant issue for the new Indonesia, the Indonesian Government, from 1948 to 1954, facilitated it with four cultural gatherings, consisting of three Cultural Congresses (held in 1948, 1951, and 1954) and one Cultural Conference in 1950. These programs provided crucial insights into the implementation of cultural policies by influential groups such as elite members, ministers, cultural bureaucrats, and artists.¹⁰²

The Cultural Congress of 1948 established the Indonesian Cultural Institute (Lembaga Kebudayaan Indonesia, LKI), officially inaugurated in March 1950 due to the Second Dutch Military Aggression. LKI's foremost program was organizing the Cultural Conference in Bandung in 1950. LEKRA was established shortly after the Bandung Conference in 1950. It sensed that these guidelines deliberately excluded the passionate revolutionary vision and ideals of the 1945 revolution. LEKRA, a cultural institution that vigorously promoted populism, significantly influenced Indonesian culture and opposed Western cultural imperialism, mainly as

¹⁰⁰ See Achdiat K. Mihadja (ed.), *Polemik Kebudayaan*, (Jakarta: Perpustakaan Perguruan Kementerian PP dan K Jakarta dan Balai Pustaka, 1954).

¹⁰¹ In her famous chapter "The Great Debate," Claire Holt also addresses the polemics. See Claire Holt, 1967, pp. 211-253.

¹⁰² For further reading, see Tod Jones, *Kebudayaan dan Kekuasaan di Indonesia: Kebijakan Budaya Selama Abad Ke-20 Hingga Era Reformasi*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Obor dan KITLV, 2015), p. 89. For the history and details of the Indonesian Cultural Congress, see Nunus Supardi, *Kongres Kebudayaan (1918-2003)* (Jakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2007). Nunus Supardi acknowledges that seven cultural congresses were held before Indonesia became independent, namely in 1918, 1919, 1921, 1924, 1926, 1929, and 1937. For further reading, see Nunus Supardi, *Bianglala Budaya, Rekam jejak 95 tahun Kongres Kebudayaan 1918-2013*, (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2013).

represented by America, England, and Western European countries. Furthermore, painters such as Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, Basuki Resobowo, and Henk Ngantung supported LEKRA. However, the organization faced a significant decline in mid-1965 due to solid suspicions of its affiliation with the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI), which was subsequently banned after attempting a coup against President Sukarno. This decline marked a turning point in the history of LEKRA.¹⁰³



Figure 7.16. A woodcut by Kusmuljo, Bojolali, 1965 as printed in *Zaman Baru* magazine. (Source: *Zaman Baru*, No. 7, July, 1965)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

LEKRA prioritizes 'Politics as the Commander' (*Politik sebagai Panglima*) by placing *Rakyat* (People) as the primary domain of creation. The consequence of this attitude is to introduce themes of workers' and peasants' lives into works of art as a novelty and call for resistance to artists who are anti-people and anti-revolutionary, and those who do not have a patriotic spirit (Fig.7.16). Resistance was also directed against the imperialist culture that had infiltrated Indonesia, primarily originating from America and its allies.¹⁰⁴ LEKRA – and artists who align with the leftist movement – associate America with 'Uncle Sam,' a figure wearing a hat with a long coat, similar to a man pointing his finger in James Montgomery Flagg's iconic war recruitment poster: 'I Want You.' The figure of Uncle Sam often appears in newspapers as the subject of ridicule and criticism (Fig.7.17A-C).

¹⁰³ See Tod Jones, 2015 p. 94. See also DS Moeljanto dan Taufik Ismail (ed.), 1995, p. 32, and Keith Foulcher, *Social commitment in literature and the arts: the Indonesian 'Institute of People's Culture' 1950–65*, (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986), pp. 16-18. For Lekra, see Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri dan Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Lekra Tak Membakar Buku: Suara Senyap Lembar Kebudayaan Harian Rakyat 1950-1965*, (Jogjakarta: Meraksumba, 2008),

¹⁰⁴ "Membina Seni Rupa Baru dan Sedjarahnja" in *Zaman Baru*, 15-31 June 1961, p. 4.



Figure 7. 17C.
An Indonesian (Sukarno?) strangling Uncle Sam is illustrated on the front page of the *Harian Rakjat* newspaper.
(Source: *Harian Rakjat*, 30 April 1965)



Figure 7.17A.
A woodcut by Harmani, *Ganjang Terus Imperialis AS* printed in *Harian Rakjat*.
(Source: *Harian Rakjat*, 17 January 1965, front page)



Figure 7. 17B.
James Montgomery Flagg, *I Want You for U.S. Army*, poster.
(Source: <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/ppmsca/55800/55870v.jpg>)

The Fine Art-ITB, later known as the Bandung School, was the first art academy in Indonesia. As discussed above, it was initiated by Simon Admiraal in 1947 in the heat of revolution. Between 1953 and 1959, several names such as Ahmad Sadali, Sukondo Bustaman, Edie Kartasubarna, Angkama S., But Muchtar, Srihadi Sudarsono, and Sudjoko¹⁰⁵ were registered as students on the ITB campus. All of them, except Sukondo Bustaman, later became lecturers there. Claire Holt reported that during the mid-1950s, the nationalists referred to the Fine Art-ITB campus as "an alien enclave in independent Indonesia." This statement makes sense considering the role and contribution of American donor agencies in promoting the development of human resources on campus. Holt disclosed that "a part of their plans concerned with the immediate functions of the school could be realized because of a generous grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund in New York."¹⁰⁶

The Fine Art-ITB was able to thrive thanks to collaborations with American institutions like the Kentucky Research Foundation and Ford Foundation. These partnerships supported young lecturers' studies and visits to the United States. There were also collaborations with Denmark, England, and the Netherlands for faculty training.¹⁰⁷ Sudjoko is one success story of the partnership with America. He completed his undergraduate degree in the late 1950s and received assistance from the Kentucky Research Foundation to pursue further education in the United States. These philanthropic foundations also helped fund the development of an art library at ITB.¹⁰⁸ Overall, these grants have played a crucial role in spreading the ideas of

¹⁰⁵ See Adjat Sakri (ed.), *Dari TH ke ITB: Kenang-kenangan LUSTRUM 4 2 Maret 1979 – Jilid 2: Daftar Lulusan ITB*, (Bandung: Penerbit ITB, 1979), p.100 and Departemen Perentjanaan dan Seni Rupa, *Kurikulum 1967-1969 Bagian Seni Rupa*, Institut Teknologi Bandung, catalogus, pp. 117-118.

¹⁰⁶ Claire Holt, 1970, pp.175.

¹⁰⁷ See Edie Kartasubarna and But Muchtar "Jurusan Seni Rupa Fakultas Teknik Sipil dan Perencanaan (FTSP) Institut Teknologi Bandung" in Wiyoso Judoseputro, et.al., *Pendidikan Tinggi Seni Rupa di Indonesia*, Institut Teknologi Bandung, catalogus, 1983, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁸ The Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report, 1956, New York, p. 24. Historian Bradley R. Simpson states that between 1952 and 1956, both Rockefeller and Ford provided financial support for creating various institutions, including the Southeast Asian Study Center and the Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University and Harvard University's Development Advisory Service. The Southeast Asian Studies Programme at the University of Berkeley and the Center for International Studies at MIT collaborate. Universities like Harvard, Cornell, Berkeley, MIT, and John Hopkins were crucial in formulating and spreading social scientific knowledge regarding political and economic progress in developing nations. Between 1950 and 1964, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundation allocated 20 million dollars to investigate Indonesian society's political, financial, and social circumstances. See Bradley R. Simpson, *Economist with Guns: Authoritharian Development and U.S. – Indonesian Relations 1960-1968*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 28-29.

Western modern art to Indonesian art education, primarily through Fine Art-ITB.

Being founded during a tumultuous national revolution under Dutch rule and strongly affiliated with the pro-Western Bloc, the Fine Art-ITB was an easy target for criticism at that time. In his article titled "Menuju Nirada" (Towards Abstraction), Sudjoko mentioned that since the mid-1950s, this campus has often faced a range of troubling accusations. These include being referred to as an "American servant," "CIA minion," "Dutch stooge," "colonial lackey," "anti-revolutionary," and more. In spite of receiving these insults, Sudjoko persisted, and the situation worsened as numerous groups, including the government, perceived this national cultural conflict in a simplistic and polarised manner. Sudjoko stated that "something with a Dutch scent is of lousy origin. If the painting is abstract, it is also terrible. Expressing opinions is acceptable, but it can carry potential hazards. *Tepaselira*, or the practice of tolerance, is strictly prohibited. Additionally, hacking compromises competition, posing a significant risk to openness. Everything accomplished in pursuing the *Revolusi Belum Selesai* (Revolution is yet unfinished)." During this era, it was difficult to determine who was an adversary and who was an ally, as anyone could be easily branded as an "enemy of the Revolution" – a designation that many sought to avoid. Sudjoko recounted the escalating psychological pressures, which even extended to matters of life and death, with threats such as: "Any art teachers on campus who have received education in a capitalist nation will face fatal consequences and all abstract works must be incinerated in the bonfire."¹⁰⁹

Fine Art-ITB was dragged into the arena of the war on cultural ideology due to Trisno Sumardjo's review of the student exhibition (Pameran Mahasiswa 1954) at the end of November 1954 in Jakarta. The exhibition brochure proclaimed, "This exhibition of young painters, still in their infancy, believe that through 'searching' and conducting 'experiments,' they will be able to dedicate to their Motherland a result that is in keeping with the breath of the times in which they grew up" (Fig. 7.18). The term "experiment," mainly because it was produced in an "educational laboratory," became the focal point of Sumardjo's criticism of the exhibition. In his essay "Bandung Serves as a Western Laboratory" (Fig. 7.19), Sumardjo—who uses the term laboratory inspired by Ahmad Saldi's painting in the show

¹⁰⁹ Sudjoko, "Menuju Nirada" in Sudjoko, *Pengantar Seni Rupa*, (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi-Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2001), pp. 148-169.

"Laboratorium" (Fig.7.20)—condemns it as a mere "Western laboratory" that produces solely artificial arts. It is sobering that individuals who complete their education on campus may fail to develop their unique personality, particularly in creating works of art that reflect national characteristics. In a different publication, Sumardjo coined the term "The Ries Mulder¹¹⁰ School" to refer to the style developed by the laboratory, a style that risks diluting our national identity.¹¹¹

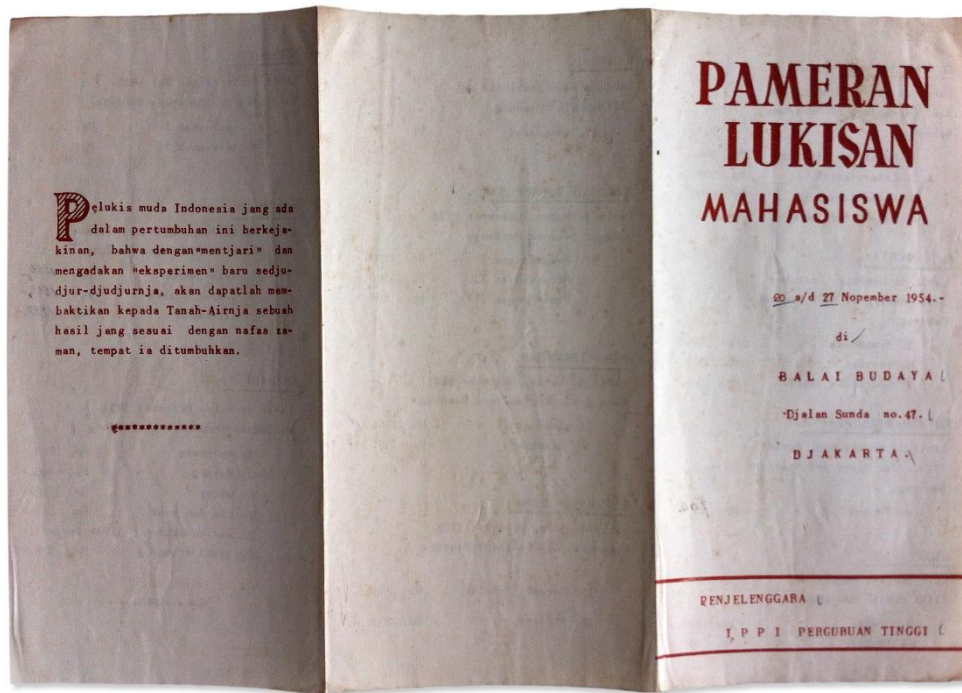


Figure 7.18.
Exhibition brochure of "Pameran Lukisan Mahasiswa 1954".

Private Collection

¹¹⁰ Ries Mulder, born in 1909 in IJsselstein, worked as an assistant on murals and stained-glass paintings under the guidance of artists such as Piet van de Wijngaardt and Charles Eyck. His work attracted attention in the Netherlands and led to an invitation to visit Indonesia. Impressed by the beauty of Indonesia, he decided to emigrate there in 1940. See "Ries Mulder gaat naar Indonesië Hij hoopt daar nieuwe motieven voor zijn schilder-kunst te vinden" in *Utrechts volksblad: sociaal-democratisch dagblad*, 8 August 1940, p. 7. In the early 1950s, Mulder joined Fine Art-ITB. Several years earlier, he was active in forums with other artists, such as Simon Admiraal and Henk de Voos, who discussed the discourse on fine arts education in Java. See "Teknacademie te Soerabaja?" in *Nieuwe courant*, 14 October 1948, p. 2. Mulder left Indonesia in 1959. See Claire, 1967 Cornell University Press, p. 239.

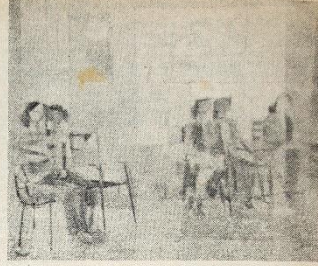
¹¹¹ See Trisno Sumardjo, "Bandung Mengabdi Laboratorium Barat" in *Siasat*, 5 December 1954, pp. 26-27 and Trisno Sumardjo, "Kedudukan Seni Lukis Kita" in *Zenith*, TH.III, No. 9, September 1953, p. 517.

Bandung mengabdikan LABORATORIUM BARAT

Pameran lukisan mahasiswa Akademi Seni Rupa Bandung berlangsung dari tgl. 20 sampai 27 November di Balai Budaya, diselenggarakan oleh IPPI perguruan Tinggi, Jakarta.

Siswa sebagai seniman Indonesia atau kri-
stis dan peminat lainnya hendak bertolak
dari kehidupan di tanah air sendiri dengan
masalah dari alam dan manusia, dia akan

KAMAR TUNGGU
Warna: kuning dan
biru tua
Harga: Rp. 2.000,—



keluarga melihat pameran ini, karena hampir
tak ada yang lolos dengan jiwa dan pe-
ngalamannya. Tapi sebaliknya, siapa sudah
biasa bertolak dari gedung sekolah dan la-
boratorium Barat, dimana jiwa dan penga-
man ke-Indonesiaan tak begitu diimbuhkan,
karena yang primer adalah hasil syntesis,
berpedoman jiwa dan pengalaman Barat,
maka diolah akan merata senang. Dia akan
hanya hanya banyunya sanggup memper-
gunakan bahan import itu — rasa, pikiran
dan materi — seperti seorang teknikus juga
sungguh membuat pesawat radio dengan
alat yang didatangkan dari luar negeri.

Kebahagiaan itu tidak pada tempatnya, ba-
han menjejalkan dilapangan seni, dimana se-
orang pencipta tidak diwajibkan menanggul-
kan bahan import, tapi menanggapi dengan ke-
kuatan sendiri. Menanggulangi bukan mustahil
bahwa orang dapat membuat sesuatu yang
bernilai dengan barang import itu, asal ia
tahu bahwa sewadarnya diharapkan dari
seorang seniman peminat sendiri, berdasar
kesadaran yang berkembang dari inti kehi-
dupan yang dialami sendiri. Kesediaan yang
melalui proses begitu barulah mempunyai da-
ja yang segar karena fitri, tidak di-bikin'.
Kesediaan yang digosokkan antara diindring
sekelah dan laboratorium belaka, bukanlah
melalui proses pertumbuhan setajam alam,
melainkan setajam kumuh.

Bahan import itu ialah seperti kami sebut
tadi jiwa dan pengalaman dunia Barat yang
dalam hal ini terjermin dalam buahnisan
Modigliani, Paul Klee, Matisse, yang ditiru
dalam pameran ini. Tak dapat disangkal ba-
hwa di antara sekelas orang seniman ini ada
yang pandai mempergunakan sebagai in-
tektik dan peladjar yang bertekun, tapi ada
dalam tubuh seniman ini terdapat juga kurang
darah, hingga tak hidup. Kami tak heran
melihat keadaan begini, karena mahasiswa
mereka adalah orang asing, menggunakan hal
ini patut disesalkan. Menilik hasil para ma-
hasiswa, mahasiswa ini bukanlah ambisior
kebudayaan Tropis yang baik, karena terlalu
menekankan norma ke-Eropaan pada ma-
hasiswa, hingga ke-Indonesiaan hanya-jang
dibawahnya. Agaknya ia ingin disebut kelas

kelas membentuk masalah di Indonesia, maka
untuk mulai ini dikawatirkan dengan se-
ngadja kesialan pribadi para murid serta pe-
ngikutnya. Pengaruhnya terlalu berat, hingga
walaupun angkatan maritima diadjar, maka
kedudukan ini terlimpa oleh ketidakdijad-
ran sang guru yang kemudian menjadi milik
muridnya juga.

Ketidakdijaduan ini terasa dalam lukisan
S i n j a i (no. 9) oleh HETTY UDI, Komposisi (no. 11) oleh KARADI Pedagogi (no. 24) dan Gupar (no. 26) oleh SINHADI S. serta hantak lainnya. Kesediaan Sindhadi me-
makai norma, menghasilkan lukisan Anak bertopeng (no. 29) yang kosong. Begitu pula Anak Gadis (no. 15) oleh POPO ISKANDAR. Dalam dua buah lukisan itu terlihat (no. 6) dan Gadis dan laki-laki (no. 7) BUT MOCHTAR hanya
tela pada sketsa berwarna, belum selesai. Be-
gitu juga SIP HATW TUNG dalam lukisan-
nya Sisevan (no. 18) dan SOEBHAKTO dalam
dua lukisan Anak (no. 19 dan 20), meski-
pun di situ ada primitivisme yang mungkin bi-
sa berkembang lebih lanjut setajam segar
dan halus. Primitivisme bertolak lain ada
pada SODJOKO, tapi agak referensi. EDHE KARTASOEBARNA lebih me-
jelaskan Kaml dengan buahkerjainya bernama Perukis (no. 8); di situ ia lepas dari maritisme yang
menghinggapi sebagian besar kawannya tadi,
yang memakai modernisme, terutama kubis-
me.

Ketjuali Hetty Udit dan Karadi yang men-
jadi guru sekolah senilukis „Djwa Mukti“,
serta Edhe Kartasoebarna dan Sodjoko yang
mendapat asisten dosen pada Akademi Seni
Rupa di Bandung, mereka ini semuanya ma-
hasiswa Akademi tersebut, yang masih me-
mepet pada falsafat Teknik. Dengan sendi-
rinja ukuran kritik terhadap mahasiswa tak
sewadarnya sama tingginya dengan ukuran
kritik terhadap seniman yang sudah lepas di-
masyarakat. Dalam taraf sekarang, mereka
tersebut diatas masih belum dapat men-
baskan diri dari kungkungan kuliah. Kami
harapkan mereka tahun depan dan selanjut-
nya menjadi lebih berprinsip. Untuk ini al-
dibutuhkan keberanian menjari masalah
sendiri dalam kehidupan serta melepaskan diri dari kekanifan sang guru.



PEDJUAN GERILA
Harga: Rp. 2.500,—

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Figure 7.19. Trisno Sumardjo, *Bandung Mengabdikan Laboratorium Barat*.
(Source: *Siasat*, 5 December 1954)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar



Figure 7.20. Ahmad Sadali, *Laboratorium*, 1954.

Collection of Ahmad Sadali Family - Bandung
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

The poet Sitor Situmorang was at that time active in the National Cultural Institute (Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional/LKN), affiliated with The Indonesian National Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia/PNI), concurrent with Trisno Sumardjo's propositions. Nevertheless, Situmorang included a discussion on modernism. I could not follow the purpose of Situmorang in his writing due to its intricacy. At least, according to him, the "Pameran Mahasiswa 1954" embodies the principles of "modernism," which draws heavily from European art in style and emotion. For him, when images become non-figurative, they no longer possess "content" or "story." In the following sections, Situmorang notes that the exhibition paintings "have not been able to overcome modernism." The reason is that "the modernism aspect," as shown in the paintings exhibited, was produced through an art academy rather than developed naturally. He stated, "In the Bandung academy, it seems that modernism has become academic."¹¹²

As I have mentioned, Spanjaard - and other art historians - did not continue the discourse and only stopped at Situmorang's writing. In fact, after Situmorang, a response that was no less critical came from Fine Art-ITB, which was also one of the exhibition participants, voiced by Sudjoko. Sudjoko's response to Trisno Sumardjo was equally cynical. He speculated that Sumardjo had never visited Bandung, conversed with painters, and examined the educational conditions on campus. It would therefore be regrettable if Sumardjo eventually developed a sense of complete knowledge regarding the complexities of art education. Sudjoko then stressed the importance of empirical substantiation in art criticism, questioning the validity of Sumardjo's critique of Bandung painters due to its lack of such evidence. Sudjoko wrote, "On campus, we conduct experiments, investigations, analyses, discussions. Here we work and formulate a healthy foundation for painting. We are thus shaping Indonesian culture." Sudjoko also disparages Trisno Sumardjo as a critic who did not have comprehensive knowledge of art history.¹¹³

Eddy¹¹⁴ also contributed to the discussion with his work titled "Laboratorium Barat?" (Western Laboratory?) (Fig.7.21). He claimed that Sumardjo's criticism was ambiguous as it lacked substantiating evidence. The longstanding disputes between West and East and the challenges related to

¹¹² Sitor Situmorang, "Modernisme" in *Siasat*, 12 Desember 1954, p. 27.

¹¹³ Sudjoko, "Kritik Terhadap Pelukis2 Bandung" in *Siasat*, 19 Desember 1954, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁴ I have not found Eddy's full name to explain his identity better. Is he Eddy Kartasubarna from Fine Art-ITB or Eddy Sunarso from ASRI?

national identity and personality should not be oversimplified or seen in absolute terms. Instead, a thorough and detailed observation is necessary. Eddy also addressed Situmorang's concept of "modernism," specifically focusing on the fundamental aspects of "line" and "form." For Eddy, Eastern art has long been a foundation for these two aspects.¹¹⁵



Figure 7.21. Eddy, "Laboratorium Barat?" (Source: *Siasat*, 2 January 1955)

The discourse continued. After the "Pameran Mahasiswa 1954," an exhibition reviewer with the initials R.K.H¹¹⁶ in *Siasat* magazine again brought up the issue of Fine Art-ITB, which did not have an Eastern character and only imitated modern European painters. His article was published to announce the opening of the exhibition of Popo Iskandar - one of the school's exponents. Although R.K.H. seems more directed at accusations at Fine ART-ITB, R.K.H. considered that Iskandar's paintings had succeeded in going beyond the characteristics of his school. Iskandar found his way out of the dogma of his alma mater.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Eddy, "Laboratorium Barat?" in *Siasat*, 2 January 1955, p. 25.

¹¹⁶ R.K.H. is likely Ramadan Karta Hadimadja, a prominent Indonesian writer and biographer.

¹¹⁷ R.K.H "Popo jang Melepaskan Diri" in *Siasat*, 12 November 1958, p. 25.

In the same magazine, Jusuf Affendy, a Fine Art-ITB student, responded to R.K.H.'s article. With the title "Bandung Fine Art Has No Eastern Breath?" Affendy questions R.K.H.'s ability to understand the ins and outs of education at Fine Art-ITB. Therefore, Affendy challenged R.K.H. to come to Bandung to experience firsthand the lectures on campus and the courses being taught, before spreading an inaccurate perception of Fine Art-ITB. Affendy believes that "painting is not a matter of west and east, but rather whether the artist is competent and capable of saying something." With this belief, Affendy emphasizes that Indonesianness is broader than how it is often perceived, and is not limited to mere "ornaments" or "decorative lines and shapes" in paintings, thereby valuing and respecting the diverse art forms.¹¹⁸

Since his exhibition sparked the debate, Popo Iskandar felt the need to speak up. He wrote a short letter to the editor of *Siasat*, published in the magazine's edition on 17 December 1958. In his letter, Iskandar expressed his concern that some Bandung artists could not accept R.K.H.'s review, which reopened the issue of Fine Art-ITB being westernized. Iskandar should have elaborated on this issue. Interestingly, he instead discussed the issue of "breaking away from educational dogma" and "a person's natural artistic development," a concept that refers to the idea that an artist's style and technique should evolve naturally over time, which R.K.H. had previously hinted at. Thus, Iskandar tended to support R.K.H.'s opinion. He emphasized that it was natural for an artist to be critical of what he had learned from art education. This critical attitude was necessary for the development of the artist's personality as long as he was able to assimilate and internalize the process so as to then be able to offer new artistic values. An artist's character was built through this process, as was his Indonesianness. That is the essence of Iskandar's thoughts in his letter.¹¹⁹

After Sumardjo and Situmorang, criticism of Fine Art-ITB, including anyone who painted in an abstract style, was continued by left-wing painters who actively campaigned that the virus of abstractionism endangered the future of Indonesian fine arts. I take the example of Batara Lubis's writing in 1964 from *Pelukis Rakjat*, where he condemned those who painted in an abstract style. Lubis expressed concern about the rapid growth of abstractionism in fine arts in an article titled "Lukisan Abstrak Bahayakan

¹¹⁸ Jusuf Affendy, "Seni Rupa Bandung Tiada Nafas Ketimuran?" in *Siasat*, 3 December 1958, p. 29.

¹¹⁹ Popo Iskandar, "Surat dan Pelukis Popo" in *Siasat*, 17 December 1958, p. 29.

Perkembangan Senirupa Kita” (Abstract Painting Endangers Our Art Development). He accused imperialists, particularly Americans, of being the masterminds behind a secret plot to eliminate "patriotic and revolutionary paintings." Regrettably, numerous painters remain oblivious to the fact that they have succumbed to the deceitful influence of imperialists and subsequently acted as advocates for their culture. "Abstract painting," Batara Lubis stated, "fundamentally embodies the painter's feminine personality, eroding ethical values and eradicating national identity." Batara Lubis cautions against abstractionism's perils in Indonesian painting by likening it to a disease. He urged the Government to promptly address the art academies in Yogyakarta (ASRI) and Bandung (Fine Art-ITB) by taking appropriate action. The Government must ensure that both academies align with a personable and revolutionary approach to art, regardless of the specific course of action. For him, Indonesian painting will only benefit "the people and our revolution" if it consists solely of these two elements.¹²⁰



Figure 7.22. D.N. Aidit at the opening of the Revolutionary Art and Literature Conference, August 1964.
(Source: *Zaman Baru*, No.2, February, 1965 – Photo by Amrus Natalsja)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

¹²⁰ Batara Lubis, "Lukisan Abstrak Bahayakan Perkembangan Senirupa Kita" in *Harian Rakjat*, 24 October 1964, p. 2.

Massive calumny against abstract art has been carried out since the Revolutionary Art and Literature Conference (Konferensi Seni dan Sastra Revolusioner - KSSR) on 27 August – 2 September 1964. During his speech at this conference, the chairman of the Indonesian Communist Party, D.N. Aidit, cursed: "Abstractionism in the field of literature and art is part of imperialist forms of cultural aggression carried out through agencies such as USIS, the American Cultural Center, Field Service, Peace Corps and others." (Fig. 7.22)¹²¹ Even the state, before the KSSR, officially emphasized through Prijono, the Minister of Education and Culture, that art and literature must serve the people. He declared this at the *Konferensi Kerja Kebudayaan* (Cultural Working Conference) on 22 January 1962. According to him, the concept of "art for art's sake" was an idea that was foreign to Indonesian society and was believed by those with a Westernized soul. Prijono also emphasized that "our modern literature and art must be devoted to the people, to the workers and farmers, in particular." For the people to understand the works of artists, the most appropriate style of modern Indonesian art is realism, Prijono stated.¹²²

The case of Gregorius Sidharta may be a relevant example to present here. Sidharta was a sculptor who joined the *Pelukis Rakjat* artistic collective and registered as the first ASRI student in 1950; when he returned to Indonesia, Sidharta taught sculpture at ASRI and then joined Fine Art-ITB in 1965. According to Supangkat and Yuliman, Sidharta's problem with quitting as a teacher was that his career was hampered because his diploma, which he received in the Netherlands, could not be recognized. However, the real problem is that Sidharta is considered an imperialist stooge by the circles of artists who live under the banner of communism.¹²³ In my opinion, the statement is entirely justified. Because, if we trace contemporary sources, *Harian Rakjat*, a newspaper that became the mouthpiece of LEKRA, in its June 1964 edition, did indeed issue a provocation by demanding that Sidharta be expelled from ASRI because of his involvement in the Cultural Manifesto

¹²¹ D.N. Aidit, *Tentang Sastra dan Seni* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pembaruan, 1964), p. 37.

¹²² "Menteri P.D dan K Prijono: Kesenian dan Kesusasteraan Harus Mengabdikan Rakyat" in *Harian Rakjat*, 25 January 1962, p. 2.

¹²³ Supangkat and Yuliman, 1982, pp. 27-28.

(*Manifes Kebudayaan*)¹²⁴ – a group of intellectuals, critics, poets, and painters who actively campaigned for artistic freedom.¹²⁵

Recalling the heated events throughout the 1950s - 1960s, a period marked by intense debates about the Westernized character of Fine Art-ITB, which created works through a “Western laboratory,” and the campus as a headquarters that spread abstractionism that had no national personality, for academician A.D. Pirous - who also experienced those tense times -, Trisno Sumardjo and Sitor Situmorang were instrumental in popularizing Fine Art-ITB in the Indonesian art scene. Regarding their criticism, Pirous considered both less accurate in understanding aesthetic problems, especially from the Fine Art-ITB faction. Pirous continued that Sumardjo and Situmorang prioritized expressionism as the ideal criteria for Indonesianness in painting. Meanwhile, Fine Art-ITB introduced a new aesthetic principle still foreign to Indonesian artists: Formalism. If the contribution of Fine Art-ITB or the Bandung School to history was because it had introduced this aesthetic, it became mainstream in the Indonesian art scene in the 1960s. Pirous describes Bandung Formalism at that time as “a principle that assesses works of art as a pure arrangement of forms, whose elements consist of lines, colors, shapes and textures. Although in the works of Bandung artists, representational objects such as human figures, landscapes or still life paintings can still be identified, these objects have been treated in such a way that they are subject to the intersection of geometric lines that seem to drown the objects in their own arrangement. At a more advanced level, these Bandung artists no longer need objects, they create solely with pure visual elements. In the history of art, this style is called abstract art.”¹²⁶

Closing this section, I would like to reiterate that the criticism of Fine Art-Bandung as a “Western Laboratory”, which originated from Trisno

¹²⁴ “Pameran Grafika AS Diganjang di Jogja: Keluarkan Dosen Inggris dari AMI” in *Harian Rakjat*, 28 Juni 1964, p. 1.

¹²⁵ Some writers and painters initiated the Cultural Manifesto. When this group declared its ideological views on 19 October 1963, it received support from artists, including some from Fine Art-ITB. Viewed as an American lackey and promoting Western bourgeois culture, the Cultural Manifesto received massive criticism from the left-wing artist camp, especially LEKRA. LEKRA demanded that the Indonesian government disband the Cultural Manifesto group and declare it illegal. In May 1964, Sukarno finally proclaimed the dissolution of the Cultural Manifesto. See *Harian Rakyat*, 17 Mei 1964, p.1; *Harian Rakjat*, 14 Juni 1964, p.1; *Harian Rakjat*, 31 Mei 1964, p.1; *Harian Rakjat*, 12 Mei 1964, p.2; and *Harian Rakjat*, 21 Juni 1964, p.1.

¹²⁶ See A.D. Pirous “Seni Rupa Bandung di tengah Pergolakan Budaya: Dari Masa Awal kemerdekaan hingga Kebangkitan Asia Pasifik” in A.D. Pirous, *Melukis itu Menulis: Kumpulan Tulisan A.D.Pirous tentang Seni Rupa dan Kebudayaan*, (Bandung: Serambi Pirous dan Penerbit ITB, 2003), pp. 170-172.

Sumardjo¹²⁷ – he was more connected with Jakarta – rather than from critics or artists from Yogyakarta, instigated the conflict continued by some some leftist painters like Batara Lubis, and LEKRA. Thus, the debate cannot be generalized as the perception embedded so far, namely Fine Art-ITB versus ASRI. Another essential point to emphasize here is that the root of the controversy of “Indonesianness” or “abstract versus realism” between artist factions cannot be separated from the previous debate between Sudjojono and Trisno Sumardjo. For Sudjojono, realism in the sense of technical and aesthetic ability is the right choice to advance Indonesian painting. As discussed in the previous section, Trisno Sumardjo denied Sudjojono’s vision.

In a broader context, the controversy about Indonesianness reflected the global conflict during the Cold War. This geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union significantly impacted various aspects of society, including the art world. The two superpowers' political tensions and ideological differences infiltrated artistic expressions, resulting in a distinct conflict relating to ideology in art. In this period, the United States and the Soviet Union employed art to promote their ideologies. Artists were urged to produce artworks that reflected the ideals and doctrines of their nations. Soviet Socialist Realism emerged as the prevailing artistic movement in the Eastern Bloc, exalting the Soviet regime. Simultaneously, the United States utilized Abstract Expressionism to endorse its cultural autonomy and creative individuality.

The aesthetic clashes were not the only representatives of the cultural cold war years. Between 1950 and 1965, post-colonial Indonesian art underwent substantial growth. Indonesian artists were exposed to international traffic, which expanded their perspectives on art within global contexts and networks. During that time, individuals and groups could travel internationally for various purposes, such as pursuing further education, cultural exchange programs, participating in conferences, cultural missions, etc.¹²⁸ Additionally, domestic events and exhibitions in Jakarta featured art from the two great factions – making Indonesia an extension of the cultural Cold War arena.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Further reading on Trisno Sumardjo, see Claire Holt, "In Memoriam: Trisno Sumardjo, December 6, 1916-April 21, 1969" in *Indonesia*, No. 8, October, 1969, pp. 212-216.

¹²⁸ Affandi's exhibition in New York was reported to be a success. See "Sukses Affandi di New York" in *Siasat*, 13 September 1958, p. 29.

¹²⁹ For instance, in 1956 an exhibition of a collection of Russian paintings took place in Jakarta. See R.K.H, "Pameran Seni Lukis dan Kerajinan Rusia" in *Siasat*, 12 December 1957, p. 28. Furthermore, Jakarta also exhibited modern European artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Albert Marquet, Jean Lurçat,



Figure 7.23. T. Sutanto, *Tjap kaki Tiga*, 1977.

Private Collection

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how artists, art critics, and intellectuals, as individuals or associated with particular cultural institutions, disputed Indonesianness, which, in turn, significantly shaped Indonesian art discourse and practice. This chapter also describes how the debate arose by providing its historical context. This protracted debate shows how serious the issue of Indonesianness was for the Indonesian art world. The controversy subsided after 1965, following the violent suppression of communist artists and their associated organizations, such as LEKRA. The bloody incident occurred because of the unsuccessful coup attempt by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in September 1965 and the subsequent persecution, disappearance, and killing of leftist artists. The following New Order regime, which replaced Sukarno's regime, distorted historical narratives, including art history, to suit its anti-communist narrative.¹³⁰

and Hans Hartung. This collection, totaling about 226 works (75 oil paintings, 15 watercolors, 87 lithographs, and 49 reproductions), was presented by France to Indonesia as a form of sympathy for independence. See Trisno Sumardjo, "Apa Pentingnya Seni Modern Bagi Kita?" in *Siasat*, 8 July 1956, p. 20

¹³⁰ For a serious study on how the post-Soekarno regime eliminated the communist artists and intellectuals, see Wijaya Herlambang, *Cultural Violence: Its practice and Challenge in Indonesia*, (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2011).



Figure 7.24. Priyanto Sunarto, *Peta Bumi Indonesia Baru*, 1977.

Private Collection

However, apart from the new regime's successes in silencing leftist artists, the debate on the identity of modern Indonesian art has continued beyond this period. The controversy started with a lecture by Oesman Effendi on 27 August 1969 at Lembaga Pendidikan Indonesia-Amerika (Indonesian-American Education Friendship Institute). He stated that modern Indonesian painting did not yet exist as no "Indonesian stamp" or identity consisting of national characteristics defined its modernity. According to Effendi, modern Indonesian painting merely imitates Western painting, inherited from the Western art academy curriculum. This provocation was assertive and rather ironic, considering that Hopman and Soemarno Soetosoendoro identified these twenty-three years earlier – as discussed in this chapter.¹³¹

¹³¹ I have discussed Oesman Effendi's provocation. For further reading, see Aminudin TH Siregar, "Conflict and Denial: The Discourse of Identity in Indonesian Art, 1950s-1980s" in Patrick Flores and

Some artists do not accept Effendi's statement. Painter Rusli, for instance, expressed surprise that Effendi was still making an issue of an "Indonesian stamp" in art. He believed one was an Indonesian painter if one had an "Indonesian passport," and stated: "Art must be free. Art should not be held back by ties of tradition, nationalism and so on. Because the existence of such ties will only paralyze the artist to the point [that] he cannot create."¹³² Yet Effendi was not alone. Another artist who questioned Indonesian art's identity was Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, from the Fine Art-ITB. He elaborated on his concerns in 1971: "Are the thoughts and ways of the West, the only way to reach today's art in Indonesia? I would like to be free of absolute values. I want to search for the local values of Indonesia."¹³³

The repercussions of Effendi's controversy had a lasting impact, significantly shaping artistic responses for years. The establishment of the Design Center Association (Decenta) in 1973 by the Fine Art-ITB lecturers responded to this controversy with their various artistic experiments. Mainly through their use of the silkscreen technique, members of Decenta, including G. Sidharta, T. Susanto, A.D. Pirous, Diddo Kusnidar, and Priyanto Sunarto, explored the local embellishment and imagery from Indonesian popular and mass culture using a Pop Art and Conceptual Art approach (Fig.7.23-24). Decenta actively promoted silkscreen on paper, a well-known printing technique among Indonesians, to challenge the elitism, which glorifies oil painting on canvas.¹³⁴

The controversy surrounding Effendi's statement also gained the younger generation's reactions, leading to a new, progressive movement that significantly reshaped the Indonesian art scene. Notable figures such as F.X. Harsono, Bonyong Munni Ardhi, Hardi, Siti Adiyati Subangun, Nanik Mirna, Bachtiar Zainoel, Jim Supangkat, and Priyanto Sunarto, who were fine arts students from Fine Art-ITB and ASRI at the time, played a crucial role in this movement. With the combination of their school backgrounds, they not only eliminated the myth of the previous Fine Art-ITB versus ASRI but also - like Decenta's experiments, which challenged elitism in art - offered new idioms in Indonesian art practice, such as object art, assemblage, and installation. For them, Indonesianness in art includes any objects familiar to

Low Sze Wee (Ed.), *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore, 2018), pp. 174-187.

¹³² Aminudin TH Siregar, 2018, p.182.

¹³³ Jim Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman, *G. Sidharta di Tengah Seni Rupa Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1982), p. 29-32 and Aminudin TH Siregar, 2018, p.186.

¹³⁴ Aminudin TH Siregar, 2018, p. 187 and interview with A.D. Pirous in Bandung, 8 June 2023.

the daily lives of Indonesians, which can then be directly displayed in the exhibition space. Their movement is known as *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* – GSRBI (New Indonesian Art Movement), which took shape in 1974.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ For *GSRBI*, see Jim Supangkat, *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia: Kumpulan Karangan*, (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1979).