

Constructions of ‘Indonesian-ness’ in Modern Art and Artistic Identity in a Politically Fraught Terrain during the 1950s

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ABSTRACT: After four years of physical struggle and diplomacy, Indonesia’s independence was officially recognized, and its sovereignty transferred on 27 December 1949. While protracted struggle and sacrifice to obtain independence had galvanised the people around an idea of Indonesia, this shared experience and political victory could not provide the sole points of reference for the social and cultural transformation necessary to engender national unity. In this article, I engage three conflicting yet ultimately overlapping arguments and positions, each one positing a modern artistic subjectivity and perspectives of an Indonesian modern art. At stake was not only participation in constructing a national identity, and giving meaning and expression to an amorphous *keIndonesiaan* (Indonesian-ness), but also related issues of creative freedom and the role art and artists would play in its formation.

Regardless of their ideological differences, the positions discussed here share a common commitment to the nation and its future, and the conviction that the revolution remained incomplete—having achieved its political but not its social and cultural aims. This includes arguments of a complex figure

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of a new man/humanity. Here, I argue a construct of artistic subjectivity in which connotations of truth and authenticity are posited as aspects of a specific aesthetic identification within the discourse and construction of Indonesianness. The intellectual horizons under discussion were simultaneously egalitarian and elitist. Media and mediation played key roles in the dissemination of such arguments of modern artistic subjectivity.

I keep my case studies specific to ideas put forward by artists and writers publicized roughly between the years 1950 to 1955. During this brief period, just prior to the first national elections, the arts experienced a kind of democratization, and can be considered among the freest and most dynamic in terms of the relationship between art, politics and nationalism, between artists and the state.

KEYWORDS: Modern art, Indonesia, artistic subjectivity, postcoloniality, LEKRA, *Seni* journal

논문초록: 1949년 12월 27일, 4년에 걸친 전쟁과 외교노력 끝에 인도네시아는 공식적으로 독립을 인정받고 자주권을 획득한다. 독립을 위한 지속적 투쟁과 희생으로 인도네시아인은 '인도네시아'라는 통일국가를 중심으로 단결하게 되었지만, 이들의 공유경험이나 일궈낸 정치적 성과만으로는 국가 차원의 단결을 위해 요구되었던 사회문화적 변화를 설명할 수 없을 것이다. 본 연구는 서로 상충되나 궁극적으로 공통된 세 가지 입장을 다루면서, 이들이 각각 현대미술의 주관성과 인도네시아 현대미술에 대해 갖고 있는 관점을 소개한다. 이들의 목표는 국가 정체성 형성에 대한 기여 뿐만 아니라 '인도네시아다움'(keIndonesiaan)이라는 모호한 개념에 대한 의미 부여 및 구현, 그리고 관련사안인 창작의 자유의 문제와 그 형성과정에 예술 및 예술가가 수행하는 역할을 고찰하는 것이다.

본 연구에서 다루는 세 입장은 사상적 차이가 있을 수 있으나 모두 인도네시아라는 국가와 그 향후 발전에 기여하고자 했다는 점에서 맥을 같이 한다. 또한 혁명이 정치적 목표는 달성하였으나 사회문화적 목표는 달성하지 못한 미완 상태라는 믿음 면에서도 공동입장을 견지한다. 여기에는 새로운 인간/인류라는 복잡한 개념에 대한 입장도 포함되어 있다. 본 연구에서 주창하는 예술적 주관성은 '인도네시아다움'이라는 논의와 그 형성 과정과 관련하여 진리와 진정성의 함의를 특정 미적 인식으로 상정한다. 본 연구에서 다루는 학계의 논의는 평등주의적이면서도 엘리트주의적이다. 미디어와 미디어화 또한 현대 예술적 주관성에 대한 주장이 힘을 얻는데 중요한 역할을 하였다.

본 연구에서 소개하는 사례는 1950년부터 1955년까지 예술가와 평론가들이 주장한 바를 중심으로 한다. 구체적으로는 인도네시아의 첫 선거가 치루지기 이전의 짧은 기간

동안의 예술계를 중심으로, 예술, 정치, 국가주의라는 삼자 관계 및 예술가와 국가라는 양자 관계 모두에서 인도네시아 예술계가 가장 자유롭고 역동적인 시기였음을 밝힌다.

핵심어: 현대미술, 인도네시아, 예술적 주관성, 탈식민성, 레크라, 세니 저널

1. Introduction

After four years of physical struggle and diplomacy, Indonesia's independence was officially recognized, and its sovereignty transferred on 27 December 1949. While protracted struggle and sacrifice had galvanised the people around an idea of Indonesia, this shared experience and political victory could not provide the sole points of reference for the social and cultural transformation necessary to engender national unity. Indonesia was a new nation of nearly one hundred million people, hundreds of ethnic groups and languages, and home to the world's largest Muslim population.² In the context of the social and cultural transformation necessary to becoming and being Indonesian, there was a concerted effort by the political and intellectual elite during the 1950s to maintain the *semangat* (spirit of the revolution) by redirecting its energies towards forging a national culture. Intimately linked to this complex issue was an explicit focus on expressing and defining *keIndonesiaan*, hereafter Indonesian-ness, and providing substance/content to independence. In its complexity, being and becoming Indonesian included both a process of forgetting and an embracing of something more (Lindsay, 2012, p. 15; Mohamad, 2002). Intimately linked to the complex issue of national culture and identity were questions of what should be done with cultural forms and production associated with the past, and past ideologies coupled with conceptions of progressive, innovative, and revolutionary art.

The culture debates and their primary sites during the late 1940's to the early 1950s differed from those that preoccupied pre-World War II Indonesian nationalism. Independence, decolonisation, and Cold War intervention afforded different models of modernity that challenged the pre-war dichotomy of 'East' versus 'West' (see Alisjahbana, 1961; Holt, 1967;

2 1945: 68 million, 1949: 74 million (Bank Indonesia, 2021).

Mihardja, 1954). The Superpowers of the socialist USSR and capitalist United States offered conflicting models of modernity, technological advancement and progress, while non-socialist Europe, including the Netherlands, was seen by many as moribund (Lindsay, 2012, p. 13). For many, the devastation of World War II had shown that Eurocentric assumptions of an enlightened universalism and a potentially disruptive avant-garde had proven inadequate and could no longer provide solutions in not only constructing a better future, but seeing this future via the legacies of the past. Alongside this 'new' West, the People's Republic of China presented a model of a 'new' East. This does not take into account the emerging force of the Non-Aligned countries and the complexities of solidarity around the concept and tense cooperation of the Non-Alignment Movement among many newly, and soon to be, independent nations from colonialism and the influx of foreign economic aid.

Artists across fields and disciplines saw themselves as active agents in the process of forging a national culture/identity and a sense of Indonesian-ness. Often couched in the name of 'the People', they were given a state sanctioned space in which to resolve, decode, test and reconstitute the existential implications of modernity and being modern, and Indonesian modern art in the context of the newly independent, decolonizing nation. This process involved redrawing mental and geographical maps of modern art and realigning its histories.

In this article, I critically engage three conflicting yet ultimately overlapping arguments and positions, each one positing a modern artistic subjectivity and perspectives of an Indonesian modern art thought capable of being progressive, innovative, and in service to the nation. At stake was not only participation in constructing a national identity, and giving meaning and expression to an amorphous Indonesian-ness, but also related issues of creative freedom and the role art and artists would play in its formation. Regardless of their ideological differences, the positions discussed here share a common commitment to the nation and its future, and the conviction that the revolution remained incomplete—having achieved its political aims but not its social and cultural ends. I keep my discussion to the years 1950 to 1955. During this brief period, the arts experienced a kind of democratization, and can be considered among the freest and most dynamic in terms of the relationship between art, politics and nationalism, between artists and the

state.³

2. *Surat Kepercayaan*, Declaration for a New Indonesian Man

Just weeks after the transfer of sovereignty, *Surat Kepercayaan* (Letter of Convictions/Testimonial of Beliefs) was publicized (drafted in 1946).⁴ It contained the core aesthetic principles and cultural platform of the *Gelanggang Seniman Merdeka* or Independent Artists' Forum (see Image 1). In it, they declare:

We are the legitimate heirs of the world's culture, a culture which is ours to extend and develop in our own way. For Indonesian culture is established by the manifold responses made on our part to stimuli from every corner of the globe, each of them true to its own nature (excerpted translation taken from Hill, 2010, p. 68).

This opening statement not only declares Indonesia's arrival as an independent nation on the world stage. It also posits an internationalist, outward-looking approach to cultural production, as well as serves as a protest against proprietary claims over modernity and being modern. It announces a new Indonesian subjectivity, one not embodied in expressions of difference but one capable of transcending ethnicity and race. Originality or defining what was authentically 'Indonesian' was not a primary goal. The Testimonial continues as a call for critical distance and self-reflection regarding the norms and values of potentially moribund, conservative (neo) traditionalist tendencies of Indonesia's 'feudal' and colonial past: "We will not define Indonesian culture. When we discuss Indonesian culture, we will not polish the products of the old culture until they shine, so we can be proud of it; we are thinking of the birth of a new, robust culture" (translation taken from

3 This is the brief period prior to the implementation of martial law and the end of constitutional democracy in 1957, during Sukarno's presidency. This does not take into account separatist movements against the Republic or calls for an Islamic state in certain parts of Indonesia during the 1950s. My discussion also does not address the importance of an early independence-era middle class. For the cultural policy under Sukarno, see Jones (2013, pp. 71-111).

4 The *Surat Kepercayaan* was originally written in 1946 by writer and poet Asrul Sani. Signed and dated 10 February 1950, it was later published in the culture supplement, *Gelanggang* (Forum/Arena), in the weekly magazine, *Siasat* (Inquiry), 22 October, 1950. Reprinted in Sani (1997, pp. 3-4).

Mohamad, 2002, p. 203).

Borrowing from Fanon, it can be argued that *Surat Kepercayaan* posited a utopian proclamation of the birth of a universal body acting on the world, authoring a ‘new man’ born out of the radical disruption of the revolution, and designed to recuperate the status of the ‘universal man’ that had been denied to the colonized by colonial systems of power (Fanon, 1970, pp. 134-135; Ross, 1995, p. 159). Physical and social “decolonization is the veritable creation of the ‘new man’” (Fanon, 1968, p. 36).⁵ While acknowledging historical and cultural differences of the colonial histories of Algeria and Indonesia, I believe that Fanon’s premise of the ‘new man’ emerging out of turmoil can be applied, to a limited extent, in the case of Indonesia. This new man, and which is loosely extended here as new humanity, is more than just a theory of representation. In other words, one’s individual identity is not embodied in expressions of difference, nor tied to any particular cultural moorings, but rather from how one experiences being in the world. In this regard, as expressed in *Surat Kepercayaan*, the revolution, which necessarily entailed forging “new values” remained incomplete. In their refusal to locate in the past the burden for creating the future, *Surat Kepercayaan* expressed a present-mindedness in which Indonesian-ness and national culture were in a continuous process of creation.⁶

Primarily written by writer/poet (later film maker) Asrul Sani, *Surat Kepercayaan* reflected the views of a cohort of young male poets, journalists, editors, writers, and painters active in the art/literary circles in Dutch-occupied Jakarta. Formed in 1946, *Gelombang Seniman Merdeka* members included the writers and poets Asrul Sani (1927-2004), Chairil Anwar (1922-1949), M. Akbar Djuhana, M. Balfas (1922-1975), Rivai Apin (1927-1995), Sitor Situmorang (1923-2014), and Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006), and the visual artists Baharudin M.S. (1911-?), Basuki Resobowo (1916-1999), Henk Ngantung (1921-1991), and Mochtar Apin (1923-1994).⁷ They were

5 Fanon suggests that wars of independence bring about many revolutionary changes, even in the most traditional sectors of society and in the most private spheres in ways that may not have been so drastic and rapid in non-violent shifts to independence. This of course does not address the most recent body of published work regarding decolonialization and theories of decoloniality.

6 Borrowing from Frantz Fanon’s notion of present mindedness, as paraphrased in Dirlik (2000, p. 130).

7 The group’s name was taken from the culture supplement *Gelombang* (Forum). Most of the writers/poets in the group were editors of the supplement.

members of a revolutionary-era network of floating coteries and closely-knit circles in which individual loyalties transcended familial and ethnic ties. Many of them had come to Jakarta from different regions of Indonesia, and from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds to gain higher education and specialized degrees. Like most educated Indonesians at the time, their reading of modernity and modern culture had been mediated chiefly via the Dutch language.

The *Gelombang Seniman Merdeka* was among several groups that emerged during this period seeking to create an independent space for thought and debate free from political interference. Their concept of creative freedom and brand of universal Humanism was in keeping with the cultural philosophy of the *Partai Sosialis Indonesia* (Indonesian Socialist Party).⁸ In this regard, their philosophy of cultural production was based on a secular, anti-totalitarian, anti-communist vision in which the unfettered artist is given the social responsibility of contributing to the renewal of Humanist values of social justice and basic human freedoms (Bodden, 1997; Heinschke, 1996). Nonetheless, such universal Humanism and ideals of a new humanity writ large were seen by many nationalists, including some who shared similar values, as political collaboration with the Dutch; hence they constituted a potential danger to the 'spirit' of anti-colonial resistance and nationalism (Hill, 2010, p. 68).⁹

Similar assumptions of a universal Humanism expressed by the *Gelombang Seniman Merdeka* via their *Surat Kepercayaan* were associated with the aesthetic foundations of the newly established Art Teachers' Training College (est. 1947) in Dutch-occupied Bandung, a university and European resort town a short distance from Jakarta. At the urging of his European and Indonesian painting instructors, *Gelombang* member Mochtar Apin (1923-1994) enrolled in 1948. While the College was specifically oriented to Indonesian students, its curriculum followed that of the Dutch art academy, including the history of the European canon and art theory. The Dutch painter and co-founder of the College, Ries Mulder (1909-1973), placed

8 The PSI, or Socialist Party Indonesia, was established in 1948 by Sutan Sjahrir (1909-1966), a member of Indonesia's European-educated intelligentsia, and key figure in the nationalist movement. He was a mentor to the *Gelombang* group, uncle to Chairil Anwar, and an editor of *Siasat* at the time. The PSI was banned in 1961.

9 This included H.B. Jassin.

emphasis on a formalist approach, on extricating form from context in order to free individual artistic creativity from its previous constraints. Initially, his students saw this as providing an emancipatory space beyond the yoke of certain religious and ethnic representational markers, and their inherent social and cultural values and hierarchies (Sudarmadji, 1974, pp. 47-53; Sudjoko, 1968). Understandably, their early works reflect the direct imprint of their teacher, whose own work was heavily influenced by the French painter, Jacques Villon (1875-1963, older half-brother of Marcel Duchamp) (see Image 2). In 1950, the College expanded as the School of Art and Architecture at the Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB).¹⁰

Among its first graduates were Mochtar Apin (1923-1994), But Mochtar (1930-1986), Ahmad Sadali (1924-1987), Sudjoko (1928-2006) and Srihadi Soedarsono (1931-2022). More internationalist than nationalist in their references and approach to art making, their work became synonymous with a school of Modernism in Indonesia, the so-called 'Bandung School'. (see Image 3) To a certain extent, the post-independence aesthetic philosophy of the Bandung School during the 1950s was a product of the Cold War, as American institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation provided scholarships to many Indonesian artists, including Sudjoko, Srihadi, Sadali, and Abdul Djalil Pirous to further their studies at universities in the United States. While there, they participated in the Foundation's many cultural and study programs designed to encourage students to align themselves with a pro-American, anti-communist aesthetics of cultural production. Additionally, the Netherlands provided study scholarships, typically with a stipend to travel throughout non-communist Europe.¹¹ Mochtar Apin (see Images 4 and 5) was among a handful of Bandung graduates to spend considerable time studying and exhibiting in Europe. From 1951 to 1958, he studied in Amsterdam, Paris and West Berlin on separate scholarships.¹² Upon their return to Indonesia,

10 The Art Teacher's Training College was established August 1, 1947 under the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Universitas Indonesia. It is now the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi Bandung, or ITB).

11 STICUSA, or the Stichting Culturele Samenwerking, was a controversial foundation for cultural cooperation between the Netherlands and its former and remaining colonies. The scholarship program for Indonesians was discontinued by 1957.

12 Apin received international and national scholarships to attend the Kunstnijverheidsschool in Amsterdam, the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris, and the Deutsche Akademie der Künste in West Berlin.

these artists took up posts at the School of Art at ITB Bandung.

Artists of the Bandung School saw themselves as active agents in the postcolonial process of *mengisikan kemerdekaan* (giving substance to independence) and in defining *keIndonesiaan* (Indonesian-ness). However, their internationalist approach and universal Humanism was strongly criticised by many socialist, nationalist and Marxist critics for failing to reflect 'Indonesian experience'. Their work was largely ignored by President Sukarno, a keen collector and major patron of modern painting of Indonesia. While amassing a diverse collection of works in a variety of styles and genres, Sukarno (himself a trained artist and civil engineer from the predecessor of ITB, the Technische Hoogeschool te Bandoeng/Bandoeng Institute of Technology) publicly favoured and patronised works depicting the heroism and sacrifice of national struggle, and daily life of the *rakyat* (common people) (see McIntyre, 1993; Protschky, 2017; Susanto, 2014; Susanto, personal communication, September 1, 2021).¹³

3. LEKRA Ideals

By the time the *Surat Kepercayaan* was published in early 1950, many members of the *Gelanggang Seniman Merdeka* had grown disillusioned with its premise. They began gravitating toward other centres of cultural discourse and ideological positions deemed better suited to addressing current realities, and the social and class conditions of cultural production in a postcolonial Indonesia. This included the *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (People's Cultural Institute), or LEKRA.

It was inaugurated on Independence Day, 17 August 1950, by D.N. Aidit and Lukman Njoto, the leaders of the newly (re)formed *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI), the Indonesian Communist Party, along with several artists and writers. This included former *Gelanggang* members Henk Ngantung, Basuki Resobowo, and Rivai Apin. LEKRA's lengthy *Mukadimah* (Preamble/Introduction), was printed and disseminated as part of the PKI's overall cultural program. It opens with an emphasis on the failed Revolution, and

13 Mikke Susanto, "Creative Industries in Indonesia" lecture, 01-09-21, University of Melbourne course Indo30002 SM 2021, Edwin Jurriens, course convenor. The author attended the live lecture via zoom at the kind invitation of its convenor.

potential threat of neo-colonial forces intervening in the country: “[T]he Indonesian people once again face a danger that not only threatens to re-enslave us politically, economically and militaristically, but also in the field of culture.”¹⁴ It continues: “The failure of the Revolution of August 1945 also means the failure of the struggle of culture workers to destroy colonial culture and replace it with one that is a democratic People’s culture.” In its construction, an Indonesian People’s culture is not adverse to integrating foreign culture or ideas in furthering its development, but that “will draw from the essence of progressive foreign cultures ... However, we will not slavishly copy anything” (translation taken from Foulcher, 1986, p. 216). Proclamations such as *Mukadimah* and *Surat Kepercayaan* discussed above share certain basic ideas. Yet, while the main quest of cultural decolonisation in the *Surat Kepercayaan* was ‘humanity’ writ large via the destruction of outmoded cultural values in forging new pathways to modern Indonesia, the *Mukadimah* is more adamant rhetorically and more precise regarding cultural relations with ‘foreign cultures’ as potential neo-colonial threats.

LEKRA was designed to counter what the PKI considered anti-revolutionary and anti-Indonesian modes of artistic production (Aidit, 1963, pp. 533-535). It publicly criticised Universal Humanism as an agent of neo-colonial imperialism, and increasingly denounced artists who advocated such a philosophy. Yet prior to the general elections and LEKRA’s *Kongres Kebudayaan Nasional* (National Cultural Congress) in 1955, the organization did not possess a coherent aesthetic program, nor did it come under direct party control (compare Ajoeb, 2004; Antariksa, 2005; Bodden, 2012, 2010; Foulcher, 1986; Zulkifli et al., 2014). This can be seen by examining numerous works of writers and visual artists who had been members of LEKRA. Michael Bodden contends that the majority of LEKRA members “viewed artist and artistic creation as something inherently outside the realm of direct political control” (Bodden, 2012, p. 471).

Within months of its inauguration, LEKRA had opened branches throughout the country. Backed by the resources of the Communist Party, it soon took precedence over struggling national institutions that lacked organisation and resources. Like many organisations tied to political parties,

14 *Mukadimah* reproduced in Antariksa (2005, p. 98). Translation by the author.

it also owned its own publishing houses and several newspapers.¹⁵ By far, it was among the most organised cultural institutions in the country at the time.

Relying heavily on pre-existing art world networks, and the influence of highly respected, well-known artists, LEKRA provided a fertile arena that attracted a wide range of socially engaged artists. It afforded political cachet by organising and sponsoring exhibitions, seminars, and art classes. It was also crucial in disseminating Marxist reading materials via its regional branches, and helped organise cultural missions and artist study tours to socialist countries in Europe, the Soviet Union and China.

Though encouraging experimentation with modern forms of painting, sculpture and other fields specific to modern arts, LEKRA differed from other aesthetic propositions discussed so far in its strong backing of regional populist arts. The thread linking the modern and the regional was, as Lindsay suggests, “a focus on the anti-elitism and anti-feudalism. LEKRA’s support was for art of the People, not that of the cultural elite, or popular forms that depicted ‘feudal’ values unquestionably” (Lindsay, 2012, p. 16). As such, its mandate also entailed a refashioning of traditional cultural forms. This process included what Bodden describes as a form of “Critical Nativism”, the “selective search for an indigenous cultural basis for modern Indonesian culture” (Bodden, 2012, p. 475).

LEKRA found a ready partner among the large community of visual artists affiliated with the many *sanggar* (collective art studios) that emerged during and immediately following the revolution, and the *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia* (ASRI) or the Indonesian Art Academy in Yogyakarta, Central Java.¹⁶ ASRI has a different place than that of the Bandung school in the history of revolutionary Indonesia. It was solely an Indonesian project. Inaugurated in 1950, its staff consisted largely of a cadre of influential, non-academically trained artists who had followed the Republican government when it relocated from Dutch-occupied Jakarta to the provincial Javanese court city in 1946. Many of ASRI’s mentors/teachers and their students were active in LEKRA.¹⁷

15 *Zaman Baru, Republik* (Surabaya), *Harian Rakjat*, *Sunday Courier* (Jakarta) and *Rakjat* (Medan).

16 Now the *Institut Seni Indonesia* (ISI), the Indonesian Institute of Art.

17 The author’s personal communications with artists, art experts and collectors within the art circles of Yogyakarta and Bandung between 1997 and 2005. See also Holt (1967, pp. 211-252), Spanjaard (2004),

One such student was Amrus Natalsya (1933), an artist from the Batak region of Northern Sumatra who entered ASRI in 1954. Though also training as a painter (see Image 6), he is better known as a member of the new generation of artists promoting sculpture as a national artform under the mentorship of senior artists and LEKRA members such as Hendra Gunawan (1918-1983) and Affandi (1907-1990).¹⁸ Natalsya joined LEKRA in 1955, and quickly became one of its leading proponents of artistic practice based on its aesthetic philosophy of the time. Works such as *Keluarga (Family)/The Dispossessed in Twilight* of 1955 (see Images 7 and 8) demonstrate this development in his early signature style.¹⁹ The nearly two-metre-high sculpture combines the techniques, sculptural forms, and decorative motifs of Batak carving traditions and what Natalsya refers to as Revolutionary Realism (Tamrin, 2008). He reinterprets the ancient forms of a museumised Batak cultural past into a contemporary national narrative (Holt, 1967, p. 226). The sculpture depicts a standing yet beleaguered male figure, presumably representing a husband and father, a female and three children that cling to her as she clings to him, each inextricably melded as one. It suggests a complex body of family and fealty, as well as a composite figure of basic human suffering and the weight of desperation in early post-independence Indonesia. This work and the exhibition as a whole can be seen as the artist's manifesto.

Keluarga/The Dispossessed in Twilight was among several works in Natalsya's 1955 solo exhibition, which was loosely sponsored by LEKRA's Jakarta branch. The PKI collected the work and placed it at the entrance of the Ali Archam Institute of Social Sciences, one of the Party's educational institutions in Jakarta (Tamrin, 2008, p. 37).²⁰ The works in Natalsya's first solo

and Sidharta and Sudjojono (2006).

- 18 Affandi and Hendra were founders of the *sanggar Pelukis Rakyat* (People's Painters) in 1947. This artists' communal studio would go on to collaborate on several commissions for national monuments designed by Henk Ngantung and Edhie Sunarso.
- 19 The title of this work is uncertain. The remaining photographic image of the work was taken by Claire Holt in 1955. It appears on the cover of the culture journal *Budaya*, April/May 1956, and titled *Keluarga (Family)*. The work is retitled 'Dispossessed in Twilight' (*Manusia Tandus di Senja*) in Holt (1967). The work was destroyed sometime in 1965, during the purge of the PKI.
- 20 Another piece from the exhibition, *Orang Buta yang Dilupakan* (Forgotten Blind Man), was collected by Sukarno for the Presidential Collection. It was the first modern sculpture collected for the Presidential Collection.

exhibition embody the aesthetic and ideological principles espoused within LEKRA and ASRI.

According to Natalsya's conceptions of art and artist, the artist (male) has an important role in society as educator, barometer and justified critic. As such, he must be morally just, if not morally superior, and be part of yet *avant* society. In order to serve the cultural struggle and cultivate compassion, the artist must '*turun ke bawah*' (turba), or live and work among the common, poor and vulnerable people to truly grasp their realities. In rendering the common people's experiences truthfully, artists must embrace the ethical value of the ugly, the abject.

In developing a new sculpture for a new Indonesia, Natalsya argued that artists should go beyond references from colonial museum collections. Rather, and as integral to the *turun ke bawah* experience, they must seek knowledge of and engage with the visual languages and technologies of common people's traditions. This meant going to regions thought remote from the centres of Java and Bali, or even considered primitive in Indonesian national cultural discourse at the time. In this way, the artist will come to know the breadth and scope of Indonesian character and Indonesian-ness, and evoke it in their work (Natalsya, 1963, 1956).

4. *Jurnal Seni* Striving for the Modern and Authentic

The first decade of independence in Indonesia is known for its manifestos and proclamations, the founding of many *sanggar* and two art academies, among other institutions. It was also known as the *angkatan majalah* (magazine generation), alluding to the proliferation of printed media after the chaos of the war (Malna, 2000, p. 111).²¹ Published for one year in 1955, the monthly *Seni* (Art) was among these new periodicals dedicated to culture and the arts, and among the very few that gave focus on Indonesian modern visual art. *Seni* was fundamentally urban, secular, politically 'nonpartisan', yet loosely a combination of social-democratic perspectives and culturally nationalist. An

21 Publishing houses were reluctant to print books on art, literature and poetry. Hence, periodicals played an important role in disseminating local and international developments. Few survived the decade due to financial and political reasons.

underlying assumption was that modern art and literature were necessary and integral parts of a modern(izing) Indonesian consciousness.

In their inaugural statement, the editors of *Seni* (1955) established a basis for discussing the complex relation between the historical reality of the nation, the development of an ‘Indonesian’ modern art production, and artistic specializations coexisting within and alongside similar processes in a modernizing society: “After gaining independence, one of our many achievements as a nation has been that our artists can now choose their own *vak* (specializations such as prose, poetry, sculpture, painting, graphic work etc.). Just as expressions of life through art naturally have the right to their own existence, so too is the profession (*vak*) of artist (*seniman*) an emerging specialization equal alongside others in society” (Editorial Board, 1955).²² Via the reality of the postcolonial nation, the Indonesian artist now has ownership of his/her own cultural production. In this relation then, they possess a sense of autonomy and mobility to transcend pre-existing constraints.²³ According to *Seni* co-editor, Trisno Sumardjo, such constraints included political interference, the force of any one tradition, as well as the perpetuation of a colonial era, Java-centric class system and social hierarchies. Another was knowledge or lack thereof.

Sumardjo (1916-1969) points out that most young artists in the newly independent Indonesia had come to maturity during the turbulent times of the war and revolution. Due to the hostilities, Indonesian cultural development had suffered and had been limited to a cadre of elites who possessed higher education (Sumardjo, 1955b, 1953). He contends that such

22 “Salah satu kemajuan dinegeri kita sesudah tercapai kemerdekaan ialah bahwa seniman-seniman kita telah memilih vaknya masing-masing. Pernyataan kehidupan melalui seni sudah sewadjanya mempunyai hak hidupnya sendiri, maka vak seniman ini adalah pembentukan spesialisasi, disamping beragam-ragam spesialisasi lainnya di masyarakat.” The editors were Trisno Sumardjo HB Jassin, and Zaini.

I thank Arndt Graf for insight into the meaning of the Dutch term *vak* as profession and specialization (AKR, field notes, in conversation with Arndt Graf, Hamburg, 2005).

23 The opening statement contains the Indonesian plural *seniman-seniman* (artists). Indonesia has no gender specific third-person pronoun (he/she). It is assumed here that the editors of *Seni* situated the artist and their role in nation building and constructions of Indonesian-ness in art as a male occupation, sphere and domain. The rhetoric and arts discourse of the time (and in previous decades) elevated the profession of artist as a male identity grounded in notions of heroism, combined with traditions of spiritual self-sacrifice and suffering associated with the cultivation of a particularly modern male Self. During its short run, *Seni* published no articles about, or works by, female writers or artists.

an environment had fostered a decadence in artistic production incapable of engendering the creative impulse necessary for the newly independent nation and artist capable or reflecting Indonesian-ness. Hence, though the physical revolution was over, that of culture and society still had yet to be resolved. This is perhaps a deliberate irony on his part that he and fellow editor HB Jassin (1917-2000) were urban, highly educated, multi-lingual and cosmopolitan intellectuals. Their experiences differ from their younger friend, painter and co-editor, Zaini (1926-1977). A leading figure in art and literary circles and known for his nationalist cultural activism, Sumardjo made it his task to expand the authorship of modernity and modernism beyond the elites, and make knowledge of art and its traditions more accessible to an Indonesian readership (see Image 9).

In this sense, journals such as *Seni* served as a remote form of arts education designed to expose its readers to the art and literature of the world, and to promote of arts appreciation. It was also part of a post-revolution shift in which Indonesian modern artists and writers, as well as exhibitions, were showcased and discussed alongside European, Latin American, American and Chinese counterparts in the same publication. Texts from Western art theory and history, as well as articles on current art, literature and occasionally music from primarily European countries were reproduced and translated into Indonesian.

Permeating the pages of *Seni* is a keen sense of moral responsibility to the nation and its people regarding the role and profession (*vak*) of artist (*seniman*). While *vak* is a Dutch term, I argue that it has other connotations beyond profession and specialization in the preamble of *Seni*. The profession of artist is a romanticized and spiritual conception of an individual with fated purpose, one of hardship but in sacrifice for the moral good. The term *vak* here then imbues the practice of modern art and artist with a heroic pathos that is at once born of the revolution and of traditions of cultivation and perseverance (*batin*). In this context, the postcolonial Indonesian artist should act as witness or take on a mission in a social, political and/or spiritual sense of defending the truth (*kebenaran*) in the face of adversity (Sudjojono, 2000). In certain of the critical, or more precisely, didactic essays in *Seni*, truth is not just located or manifested in the fragments of everyday life represented. Truth is to be revealed in the artist's unfettered independence, yet through their also assumed dedication to the new nation and its process of psychological and

cultural decolonization. It is in their revelation of truth that the artist reveals his/her *kepribumian* (indigenous) authenticity. This complex figure of the new man/humanity, and its connotations of truth and authenticity, has a specific aesthetic identification within the discourse and construction of Indonesian-ness (Situmorang, 1955b). It is one that was simultaneously egalitarian and elitist.

Yet, herein lies a problem. The level of authenticity in a work of art or literature was related to the artist's own innate sensibility. Because it is 'sensed' more than it is representable, Indonesian-ness (as both modern and authentic) is therefore often defined by what it is *not* (Situmorang, 1955b).²⁴ A key aspect of Indonesian-ness discussed in the pages of *Seni* is this 'sense of difference' that embodies the complexities of colonial history, without attempting to construct 'pure difference' (Hall, 1994). Situmorang argues that Indonesia and other postcolonial nations had to write and read their recent literature through the lens of European aesthetics and ethics even as they struggle to free themselves from it (Situmorang, 1955b, p. 115).²⁵

There are instances in which art and artist fail in their duty. The editors and contributors of *Seni* were opposed to both the reification of myth and legend and what they considered cosmopolitan alienation from cultural moorings. For example, Sumardjo found in the salon and court painter, and Presidential favourite, Basoeki Abdullah (1915-1993) (see Image 10), an anti-thesis to the idea of 'authentic Indonesian' artist. In as much as many in the cultural field agreed that his work was sentimental, Sumardjo's scathing criticism of Basoeki's work was also a critique of attempts to nationalize Javanese mythologies, aristocratic representations of exclusion, as a visual rhetoric for the nation (Sumardjo, 1955a). In this regard, it is also a veiled critique of Sukarno's Presidential collection. The President's rhetoric of a national culture often contradicted his personal aesthetic tastes. His collection and choice of presidential painter and curator continued to

24 Compare with Toer (1955), Sumardjo (1955b), and Sunindyo (1955).

25 Pembatasan pengertian seperti itu rasanya dapat pula saja benarkan dengan mengemukakan alasan bahwa sepanjang kita mengenal kebudayaan dan sastra bangsa lain di luar lingkungan Eropa, maka pandangan kita terhadapnya adalah melalui pandangan Eropa: jang sampai kepada kita melalui saringan estetika dan etika Eropa: sastra terbaru diluar Eropa berada dalam situasi sastra terbaru seperti jang ada di Indonesia, dengan posisi jang sama terhadap estetika dan etika Eropa (dalam usaha membebaskan diri).

betray his initial art training in Academic Dutch Romanticism. According to Sumardjo, Abdullah's sentimental and grand depictions of past legends, Javanese mythology and romanticized figures were devoid of any 'real' referent for Indonesian-ness in a modern society. This lack cast the artist's work as decadent conceit, 'not Indonesian enough', and thus denied a place in the national imaginary.

Similarly, and pertinent to the present discussion via their absence, no artist associated with *Surat Kepercayaan* or any of its subsequent activities (except the painter Baharudin) were represented or reviewed in *Seni*. Neither were works by artists associated with the Bandung School. This is not surprising. Just weeks prior to *Seni's* first edition, Sumardjo's critique, '*Bandung Mengabdikan Laboratorium Barat*' (Bandung serves the Western laboratorium) was published in *Siasat* (the same magazine that published *Surat Kepercayaan* in 1950). Here he labelled the Bandung School the School of Ries Mulder, suggesting that it is not a dynamic development but a case of stagnating adherence to another's—to a Dutchman's—obsession (Sumardjo, 1954).²⁶ Accusing the artists of being 'slaves to the Western laboratory', he further argued that Indonesians could not see themselves reflected in these abstract styles. They were confronted with a foreign language that the artists failed to adequately translate into an Indonesian visual sensibility.

Yet, *Seni* did include texts from writers and literary critics from diverse positions. During its short run, *Seni* provided a podium for writers, artists and critics to advance their arguments of an Indonesian artistic subjectivity and conceptions of Indonesian-ness in creative expression. Its timing holds significance. Contributors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Sitor Situmorang, and Trisno Sumardjo shared more in common in 1955 than they would a couple of years later (see Situmorang, 1955a; Sumardjo, 1955b; Toer, 1955). Increasing tensions among the nation's political factions would polarize the cultural field and make it difficult if not impossible for periodicals like *Seni* to continue publishing.

26 In personal communications as early as 1952, during his time in the United States under a Rockefeller scholarship, he expresses his dislike and wariness of post-war American painting. He considered it derivative of European modernism and indicative of a sterile personality (Liem, 2012, p. 180).

5. Concluding Remarks

In this contribution, I have underscored certain conflicting yet overlapping arguments and positions, each proposing a modern artistic subjectivity and art practice thought capable of being progressive, innovative, and in service to the nation. At stake was not only participation in constructing a national identity, and giving meaning and expression to an amorphous Indonesian-ness, but also related issues of creative freedom and the role art and artists would play in its formation. While many of the propositions developed and circulated within the rapidly emerging artists' collectives, cultural organizations and institutions, print media served as a crucial vehicle in publicizing the many manifestos and proclamations. It provided a widespread platform for vital debate regarding the direction of national culture and defining and providing content of Indonesian-ness.

Two fundamental ideas pervaded the arts discourse of the early independence era. One was that artistic production is in the hands of the individual, an autonomous sovereign being who is also equally morally responsible to the larger community of the nation. The modern Indonesian artist was no longer bound by traditionally prescribed values, including cultural, ethnic and religious bigotries. Nor should they be beholden to Western and/or Colonial proprietary claims over modernity and modern cultural expression. Secondly, regardless of their ideological differences, most shared the conviction that the revolution remained incomplete—having achieved its political aims but not its social and cultural ends. An underlying subtext in this regard were questions of cultural authenticity and indigeneity specific to the conditions of a new Indonesia. A major component to this was also debates over whose cultural traditions and memories would be best suited for such a project, including what should be done with cultural forms and production associated with the past. Artists saw themselves as integral to this nation-building process, and in defining a sense of Indonesian-ness via creative expression, of bringing together a multiplicity of cultural registers, sites, temporalities, technologies and systems of knowledge. Here I have situated this development in close proximity with Fanon's conception of new man as an extension of overlapping arguments of a new Indonesian artistic subjectivity within the larger and possibly more constrained frame of Indonesian-ness.

I have kept my discussion mainly to the years 1950 to 1955. During this brief period, the arts experienced a kind of democratization, and can be considered among the freest and most dynamic in terms of the relationship between art, politics and nationalism, between artists and the state. New possibilities were explored and a plurality of opinions was tolerated. By the mid-1950s, and after the 1955 election, the revolutionary spirit was giving way to “widespread disillusionment as the harsh realities of Indonesia’s postcolonial condition began to impinge on the effective functioning of both nation and state” (Foulcher, 2012, p. 31). As the political situation in Indonesia increasingly destabilized, artists were pressured to align themselves along ever more disparate factions.

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Professional Profile

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Images

Image 1: Members of *Gelanggang Seniman Merdeka* (Arena of Independent Artists—Asrul Sani, Rivai Apin, Mochtar Apin, Baharuddin and Henk Ngantung, Jakarta 1948. Photo by Charles Greyer. Leiden University archive.



Image 2: Ries Mulder in his office, Bandung School. Shown with his *Rooftops of Bandung*, 1956. Photo C. Holt. Claire Holt Indonesian Art Collection, Kroch Special Collection, Cornell University.



Image 3: Srihadi Soedarsono, *Wanita-Wanita* (Women), 1957, oil on canvas. Courtesy of art1 Museum and the artist's family.



Image 4: Mochtar Apin, *Vue de Village*, 1953, oil on canvas. Collection Museum Universitas Pelita Harapan.



Image 5: Mochtar Apin, *Musim Dingin* (Winter), 1953, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist's family.



Image 6: Amrus Natalsya, *Batak Woman*, 1957, oil on canvas, Collection Museum Universitas Pelita Harapan.



Image 7: Amrus Natalsya, Dispossessed at Twilight, 1955, 1.8mtrs, wood sculpture (Photo C. Holt). Claire Holt Papers, New York Public Library. Work destroyed in 1965.



Image 8: Amrus Natalsya, Dispossessed in Twilight detail (Photo Claire Holt). Cover of Budaya April/May 1956. Work destroyed in 1965.



Image 9: Trisno Sumardjo painting one of National History series, 1957. Collection Dewan Kesenian Jakarta.



Image 10: Basoeki Abdullah, *Nyai Roro Kidul* (Princess of the South Sea), oil on canvas. Image from *Paintings and Statues from the Collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia*, vol. II, pl. 105, edited by Lee Man Fong (Tokyo: Topan Printing, 1964).

