



PROJECT MUSE®

---

13 Conflict and Denial: The Discourse of Indentity in  
Indonesian Art, 1950s-1980s



Published by

Flores, Patrick and Sze Wee Low.

Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia.

1 ed. National Gallery Singapore, 2018.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.109964>.

➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109964>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[172.71.254.224] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 20:04 GMT)

- 1 Oesman Effendi, "Surat I, Perkembangan Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru: Surat-Menyurat antara 2 Orang Pelukis" [Letter I, New developments in Indonesian painting: A conversation between two painters], *Zenith*, 15 February 1951, 81. Author's translation.
- 2 Jim Supangkat, "The Two Forms of Indonesian Art," in *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Traditions and Change 1945–1990*, ed. Joseph Fischer, exh. cat. (Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS; New York: Festival of Indonesia, 1990), 220.
- 3 For further reading, see Trisno Sumardjo, "Kemerdekaan dan Kesenian" [Independence and the arts], *Indonesia XI*, no. 4, 155–8.
- 4 Helena Spanjaard, *Moderne Indonesische schilderkunst* [Modern Indonesian painting] (Abcoude: Uniepers, 2003), 81.
- 5 Trisno Sumardjo, "Bapak Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru" [The father of Indonesian modern painting], *Mimbar Indonesia*, no. 41 (8 October 1949). Author's translation.
- 6 M. Balfas, "Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru" [New Indonesian painting], *Indonesia* no. 4 (April 1951): 2–6. Author's translation.
- 7 S. Sudjojono, *Seni Loekis, Kesenian dan Seniman* [Painting, the arts and the artist] (Yogyakarta: Indonesia Sekarang, 1946), 8. Author's translation.

(13)

## Conflict and Denial: The Discourse of Identity in Indonesian Art, 1950s–1980s

Aminudin TH Siregar

*The differences between East and West are only relative, to the point [that] it becomes nonsense.*<sup>1</sup>  
Oesman Effendi, 1951

The long-standing problems that gave birth to unique developments in Indonesian modern art arose from the cultural debate of confrontation between the West and the East. This debate is not unique to Indonesia, being prevalent in many developing countries, and various studies conducted by Western researchers or developing countries themselves show that these kinds of debates stem from sociopolitical conflicts. The search for Eastern values within these debates is not based on Orientalism; typically, it is a reaction based on anger over the displacement of ethnic cultural identities by Western culture during colonial times.<sup>2</sup> If the

“West” here traditionally refers to Western culture, the “East” relates to locality and is commonly understood as standing for the values of ancestral heritage.

The theme of conflict and denial in this essay is discussed as it pertains to modern art—its meaning and its relation to the Indonesian contemporary cultural scene at large. But modern art did not just happen. It arose as a result of deepening nationalist values in the revolutionary era after the 1945 Proclamation of Indonesian Independence and can be traced back to ideas first introduced in the 1930s. The intellectuals and artists were aware that something radical was happening around them, but it was not always easy to identify. They were aware too that tremendous change had come over the arts at that time. Why? What were

the true forces behind the change? What does “modern art” really mean? Indeed, there is an opportunity to enrich the hypothesis in the previous paragraph by observing shifts in East–West discourse within the history of Indonesian art, and the conflict and denial between actors in the era of postcolonial awareness. The search for Eastern values in fact started with an awareness of the Eastern exoticism used by European painters in their works. It is too simplistic to conclude this issue was purely caused by the anger of the locals or angst over displacement; we must consider the option that it was also buoyed by painters looking at Indonesia through new perspectives. Examining the history of Indonesian art, it is clear that the greatest conflicts actually happened between Indonesian artists, rather than between Indonesian artists and the Dutch. Not everything can be explained by antagonism towards the West.

After proclaiming its independence on 17 August 1945, Indonesia entered into a post-colonial situation of social, political and cultural ambiguity. The tense, confrontational situation between 1945 and 1949 forced Indonesia into battling the Dutch using both weapons and diplomacy, until the latter eventually acknowledged the sovereignty of the new nation on 27 December 1949. After the transfer of independence, intellectuals and artists began questioning how Indonesia should define for itself an identity with national characteristics—an issue that had bearing on the direction of its art and culture. Nevertheless, they soon realised that security, stability, and economic and political recovery were the main issues that had to be addressed by the Sukarno administration.<sup>3</sup>

Fiercely debated began in the run-up to 1950, in cultural congresses and seminars. Concepts of art and culture were disseminated through articles in magazines and newspapers. Outside of official channels used to promote the new national culture, the intellectuals and artists gathered in studios, their favourite places to trade ideas. It was in these studios that they

discussed culture and art, and the role of art in creating a new identity for Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will elaborate on these debates.

### The Early Phases of Heading East

The pages of Indonesian modern art history begin with S. Sudjojono (1913–1986). As a thinker and ideologist, he is not a mere painter. In 1949, critic Trisno Sumardjo said this of Sudjojono: “In Indonesia’s lethargy and quietness of spirit and soul during the occupation era, Sudjojono’s voice was like a *nafiri* [a traditional trumpet-type musical instrument] emanating a new sound, bringing up those who were cowering, to stand up and use their soul’s ear.”<sup>5</sup> Before the arrival of the Japanese, Sudjojono was the only painter who had actively pushed for painting to enter the debate of national culture. He placed a sign on his studio’s door that stated: “In Search of the Uniting Characteristic of Indonesia.”<sup>6</sup>

The search for the characteristics of Indonesian painting began with the founding of the Association of Indonesian Drawing Masters (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia, PERSAGI) in 1938 by a few painters in Jakarta. However, quite a few people criticised PERSAGI painters as being discernably Western. PERSAGI painters naturally denied the charge, although the accusation was not unfounded. While the group was nationalistic, its key figure Sudjojono, openly admired European painters such as Vincent van Gogh and Marc Chagall. Sudjojono also derided traditional art, describing it as art that was antiquated and “smell[ed] of *oncom* [traditional West Javanese food] and incense,” and was unsuitable for the spirit of the times.<sup>7</sup> In *Seni Loekis, Kesenian dan Seni-man*, he showed his avant-garde attitude along with his strong nationalistic empathy. Among other things, he highlighted the importance of five things: leaving behind the dogma of tourism; not searching for beauty in the past (for instance, art from the Majapahit or Ma-

- 8 Ibid., 7–9.
- 9 There are many variations regarding the founding date of POETERA. Some say it was in 1943, while others specify 1 March 1943. See *Djawa Baroe*, no. 5, 1 March 1943. Yet in *Djawa Baroe*, no. 1, 1 January 1943, it states that POETERA was founded on 8 December 1942, coinciding with the first anniversary of the Greater East Asia War and POETERA's first exhibition.
- 10 Imam Boechori Zainuddin, *Latar Belakang Sejarah Pembinaan dan Perkembangan Seni Lukis Indonesia*

*Modern (1935–1950)* [A historical background of the development of modern Indonesian painting] (master's thesis, ITB, 1966), 36.

- 11 Ibid., 48.
- 12 Boejoeng Saleh, "Perkembangan Kesusasteraan Indonesia" [The development of Indonesian painting], in *Almanak Seni 1957* [Art almanac 1957], ed. Zaini (Jakarta: BMKN, 1956), 30.
- 13 Aiko Kurasawa, *Mobilisasi dan Kontrol: Studi Perubahan Sosial di Pedesaan Jawa 1942–1945* [Mobilisation and control: A study of social change in rural

taram eras); not listening or becoming a slave to one of the *moralisierende-mensen* (moralisers or moralising people) groups or parties; being wholly independent, releasing oneself from the binds of morals or traditions; and treating daily realities as the arena wherein to search for the "Indonesian national identity."<sup>8</sup>

Before World War II, PERSAGI, through Sudjojono, contributed many important thoughts about how best to handle the lack of practice and discourse in painting since Raden Saleh's work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sudjojono tended to foreground nationalism in painting while denying that modern painting was a continuation of the traditional arts, even distancing it from Raden Saleh's achievements. The understanding of new Indonesian painting was instead offered via paintings that emphasised the recording of daily life. In less than five years, however, PERSAGI disbanded when the 16<sup>th</sup> Division of the Imperial Japanese Army landed on and occupied Java.

In the early months of the Japanese Occupation, popular independence figures like Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta, K.H. Dewantara and Kyai Mas Mansoer founded the Centre of People's Power (Poesat Tenaga Rakjat, POETERA).<sup>9</sup> POETERA worked hand-in-hand with the Japanese, building up the people's support to win the Greater East Asia War (Dai Toa Senso). Sudjojono and Affandi led the cultural

section of POETERA, and the Japanese used POETERA to popularise the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Dai Toa Kyo-eiken). One of POETERA's exhibitions, titled *Winning the Greater East Asia War* and held at the Rakoententji night market on 8 December 1942, was evidence of Japanese interests.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition accelerated the emergence of new painters, and the Japanese played a role in introducing these painters to the public through 23 exhibitions held from 1943 to 1945.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese encouraged Indonesian painters to develop their art from Eastern values and reject the West. To that end, myths about the stateliness and superiority of the East were spread, along with tales of the lowliness and decadence of the West.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese maintained that the various East Asian nations had to be convinced they were really one: one cultural character—Eastern culture—under threat from the West.

Keimin Bunka Shidosho (KBS) was founded by the Japanese government on 1 April 1943 in Jakarta, and had divisions in Bandung, Malang, Semarang and Surabaya. KBS was known as a cultural centre, its name literally translated as: *keimin*, enlightenment for all; *bunka*, culture; and *shidosho*, place or centre for briefing. Congruent with these definitions, KBS was founded to enlighten and educate the public about art and culture. One of the official

Java 1942–1945] (Jakarta: Grasindo, 1993), 61.

- 14 Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 198–9.
- 15 Sanusi Pane, “Seni Indonesia Siap Berkembang” [The art of Indonesia ready to evolve], *Soeara Asia*, 22 May 1943. Author’s translation.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 In D. Suradji’s version of the translation, Hopman’s article was titled “Hari Kemudian Seni Bentuk di Indonesia” [The future of Indonesian art]. See D. Suradji, *Bertebaran: Rangkuman Tulisan Menyinari Seni*

*Drama, Film, Lukis dan Sketsa Ibukota R.I.S* [Scattered: A compilation of texts of theatre, film, painting and sketches of the Capital of the Union of Republik Indonesia] (Jakarta: Haruman Hidup, 1961), 147–8. Under the same title and indeed using the translation from D. Suradji, the article was also printed along with S. Sudjojono’s book, *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa* [We know where we are going with Indonesian art] (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, 1948).

reasons behind its founding was that for over 300 years, the Dutch colonial government had failed to progress Indonesian art and culture, just as it had failed to provide opportunities for Indonesians. The long-term goal of KBS was thus aligned to the larger development goals of Greater East Asia.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike KBS, painters from POETERA avoided propagandistic subjects and themes in their work like planting cotton, *romusha* (forced labour), the spirit of warriors or saving money, which were diligently campaigned by the Japanese. Interestingly, a few Japanese artists within KBS safeguarded the purity of art so that it could not be subordinated to propagandistic ideology. Japanese artists also spread the techniques and styles of Western painting to Indonesian painters, leading many historians to suspect that Indonesian painting during the Japanese Occupation actually became more Western.<sup>14</sup> The Japanese consciously attempted to achieve a balance between artistic content, entertainment and slogans. However, in practice, the lines between propagandistic art and art for art’s sake became blurred.

The Japanese government placed pressure on Indonesian painters to find Eastern characteristics of painting via exhibitions and painting competitions. When KBS held a 1943 exhibition titled *Kehidupan Djawa Baroe* (The New Life in Java), the organisation awarded

female painter Emiria Sunassa a prize. Paintings from Sudjojono, Soekirno and Agus Djaja were also received with much fanfare. Sanusi Pane, a KBS administrator, praised these artists, opining that “their steps seem to have stepped further towards the realm of Indonesia and the East.”<sup>15</sup> Sunassa appropriated the essence of primitive sculptures from Indonesia, which could be said to give a “prehistoric feel” to her work; Sudjojono was said to be “attempting to achieve Indonesian norms”; Soekirno appropriated the basics of *wayang* (shadow puppet theatre) and used primitive colours and the atmosphere of giant temples from *wayang* stories; and Agus Djaja, who appropriated the substances and styles of sculptures and reliefs of temples, was said to “elevate Eastern values.”<sup>16</sup> Artists felt they had discovered Eastern or Indonesian values but this sense did not last beyond the end of the Pacific War, when the Japanese left Indonesia.

### Denials

In a magazine published in 1947, Dutch critic J. Hopman denied the existence of truly Indonesian painting and even predicted that it would cease to exist in a few years. Hopman admitted that the content of Indonesian paintings was Eastern, but felt the methods merely aped those of Western modern art.<sup>17</sup> Sudjojono was

- 18 Sudjojono, *ibid.*, 3.  
 19 *Ibid.*, 14–5.  
 20 See Soemarno Soetosoendoro, “Seni Lukis Kita dalam Mencari Jalan” [Our painting finds its way], *Indonesia* no. 10 (November 1949).  
 21 See the rebuttal in Trisno Sumardjo, “Seni Lukis Kita Bukan Tiruan: Tanggapan atas Soemarno Soetosoendoro,” *Indonesia* II, no. 4 (April 1950).  
 22 Suromo, “Tentang Seni Lukis” [About art], *Indonesia* II, no. 2 (February 1950).  
 23 Baharudin Marasutan, “Seni Rupa Indonesia Sekarang” [Indonesian art now], *Daya*, no. 1 (1 February 1949), cited in Ugeng T. Moetidjo & Hafiz, *Seni Lukis Indonesia Tidak Ada* [There is no Indonesian painting], ed. Ugeng T. Moetidjo (Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, 2007), 72.  
 24 Trisno Sumardjo, “Realisme Sudjojono” [Sudjojono’s realism], *Mimbar Indonesia* no. 20 (May 1950). Sudjojono wrote a rebuttal in the same journal over two editions, nos. 33–4 (August 1950).

angered by Hopman’s denial. In the magazine *Revolusioner*, he retaliated by demanding that the Dutch leave issues of Indonesian painting alone, asserting: “We know where we want to bring Indonesian painting.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, after hundreds of years of occupation it was clear the Dutch had been ineffectual in managing and progressing Indonesian painting.<sup>19</sup>

Two years later, academic Soemarno Soetosoendoro stood with Hopman.<sup>20</sup> His cynical article about Indonesian painting received a harsh rebuttal from Sumardjo in an article titled “Seni Lukis Bukan Tiruan” (Our paintings are not imitations).<sup>21</sup> At the same time, a painter from the PERSAGI era, Suromo, also maintained that Indonesian painting did not copy Western painting. Suromo was careful to note this did not therefore mean that Western art had no influence on Indonesian painters, and also brought up the inherent normality of “influence” in culture.<sup>22</sup> Painter and photographer Baharudin Marasutan also admitted that Indonesian painters were initially heavily influenced by the achievements of Western painting, although the process of influencing did not result in mindless imitation. Indonesian painters certainly studied the techniques and essence of Western painting diligently. However, he believed that Indonesian painters with Indonesian souls, who live among their people and breathe the air of their land, would be able to

create paintings that coincide with the personality, spirit and aspirations of the nation—an “Indonesian-ness” both specific and unique.<sup>23</sup>

Also in 1949, after his rebuttal of Hopman, Sudjojono urged painters to follow a return to realism. Sumardjo once again fiercely rejected it, as he felt it narrowed the meaning of realism and ignored the potential of creativity and freedom of the artist.<sup>24</sup> Sumardjo, a right-wing artist, held this opinion: “Sudjojono’s realism does not recognise the value of spirituality, it is left with the surface of the senses. Realism should occur through the spirit as we would have it, through each true artist.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, in the eyes of Sudjojono communist realism in painting expressed the will of the times. Other than being an advocate for paintings that could be understood by the masses, he also asked modern Indonesian painters not to use abstract styles. Abstraction in art, he felt, was “the art of the bourgeois,” and just as the people needed rice, the people needed realism.

Sudjojono realised that the occupation and the war had worsened Indonesian society. His belief that one of the main functions of art is to serve the people forced him into action, with the recognition that it was no longer possible to merely stand as a spectator of society. In PERSAGI, he remarked that art must improve society. Therefore, art must actively and concretely change society into something bet-

- 25 Trisno Sumardjo, “*Kedudukan Seni Rupa Kita*” [The position of our art], in *Almanak Seni 1957* (s.l.: s.n., n.p.), 137. Author’s translation.
- 26 Aminudin TH Siregar, *Sang Ahli Gambar: Sketsa, Gambar dan Pemikiran S. Sudjojono* [The drawing specialist: Sketches, drawings and thoughts of Sudjojono] (Jakarta: Sudjojono Center & Galeri Canna, 2010), 98.
- 27 Statement publicised in *Brochure Kesenian* in 1949 in an interview between Dr Huyung and S. Sudjojono.
- 28 Trisno Sumardjo, “Bandung Mengabdikan Laboratorium Barat” [Bandung is a servant of the laboratory of the West], *Siasat*, 5 December 1954, 26.
- 29 Helena Spanjaard, “Bandung, the Laboratory of the West?” in Fischer, op. cit., 207.
- 30 A.D. Pirus, interview with the author, March 2012.

ter than it was, lending its power to mobilise the people towards concrete social goals.<sup>26</sup> He declared: “Realism, for me, is more *real*. If Yogyakarta is taken, I would want to take back the *real* Yogyakarta. If I haven’t eaten, I must eat rice. *Real* rice. When I fight for independence, I want *real* independence. Not symbolic. Not fulfilling, but *real*.”<sup>27</sup>

#### Abstraction versus Socialist Realism

Aside from studios, university campuses were also dragged into the East–West debate. Founded in 1947, the art academy at Institute of Technology Bandung (Institut Teknologi Bandung, ITB), under the tutelage of Dutch painter Ries Mulder, was a Western institution. The resulting artworks were not based on experiences of Indonesia, but were oriented towards the sensibilities and events of the West.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the works of painters at the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia, ASRI, founded in 1950 in Yogyakarta) embraced themes of the people, at the time imagined as “Indonesia.” These opposing trends brought forth tension between what is known in Indonesian art history as the Bandung school of thought, typically represented by ITB, versus the Yogyakarta school of thought, led by ASRI. Historian Helena Spanjaard notes that in this debate, it must be observed that

both the Bandung (abstraction and Cubism) and Yogyakarta (realism and expressionism) schools followed Western painting practices. The differences lay merely in the basic themes of their paintings.<sup>29</sup>

As with Piet Mondrian who heavily influenced the development of abstract art since his arrival in New York in the 1940s, Mulder is thought to have done the same in Bandung. Before arriving in Indonesia, he lived in Paris, studying European modern art and its history, philosophy and theories. During his stay, Paris was still the centre of the modern art world, where Cubism and Futurism were developed. In 1910, Jacques Villon started to experiment in Analytical Cubism, which was then absorbed by Mulder and taught to his students in Bandung. This fact showcases the development of European modern painting outside America (and particularly New York); as an “agent,” Mulder brought the knowledge of European modern art across the Asia Pacific for study in Bandung.

Reactions to the new developments in painting in Bandung did not only come from the studio painters of Sudjojono’s generation. Left-leaning painters also vocalised vehement criticism.<sup>30</sup> These reactions were quite understandable as the style of paintings coming from ITB deviated from mainstream painting at the time, which was based on the realism of



- 31 Jennifer Lindsay, "Ahli Waris Budaya Dunia 1950–1965: Sebuah Pengantar" [Heirs to world culture 1950–1965: An introduction], in *Ahli Waris Budaya Dunia; Menjadi Indonesia, 1950–1965* [Heirs to World Culture; Becoming Indonesia, 1950–1965], eds. Jennifer Lindsay & Maya H.T. Liem (Denpasar: Pustaka Larasan; Jakarta: KITLV-Jakarta, 2011), 12. Author's translation.
- 32 Keith Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts: The Indonesian 'Institute of People's Culture' 1950–1965* (Clayton: Monash University Center of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 212.
- 33 D.N. Aidit, *Tentang Sastra dan Seni* [On literature and art] (Jakarta: Yayasan Pembaruan, 1964), 52–3.
- 34 Sunaryo, interview with the author, January 2006. See the supporting archives of Bandung artists for the *Manifes Kebudayaan* in D.S. Moejanto & Taufik Ismail, *Prahara Budaya: Kilas Balik Ofensif Lekra/PKI dkk.* [The cultural hurricane: Looking back at the offensive of LEKRA/PKI DKK], eds. D.S. Moejanto & Taufik Ismail (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1995), 439.
- 35 Aidit, op. cit., 64. Author's translation.
- 36 For further reading, see Moejanto & Taufik, op. cit.
- 37 See further details in Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, *Menguak Luka Masyarakat Beberapa Aspek Seni Rupa Kontemporer Indonesia Sejak 1966* [Exposing society's wounds: Aspects of contemporary Indonesian art since 1966] (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1997), 25.
- 38 Sudarmadji, *Dari Saleh Sampai Aming, Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru dalam Sejarah dan Apresiasi* [From Saleh to Aming, an appreciation of new Indonesian painting and its history] (Yogyakarta: Sekolah Tinggi Seni Rupa Indonesia "ASRI" Yogyakarta, 1974), 75. Author's translation.
- 39 Miklouho-Maklai, op. cit., 28.
- 40 See Kenneth M. George, *Melukis Islam: Amal dan Etika Seni Islam di Indonesia* [Picturing Islam: Art and ethics in a Muslim lifeworld] (Bandung: Mizan, 2012), 21.

PERSAGI, Young Artists Indonesia (Seniman Indonesia Muda, SIM) or the Institute of People's Culture (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, LEKRA), and revolved around populist concepts. Many harboured suspicions that ITB was a product of neocolonialism, subservient to the West and filled with middle-class bourgeois practices. Those outside ITB could not differentiate between paintings by different ITB artists. Mulder himself had been accused as a spy many times.

Entering the 1950s, sociopolitical confrontations related to the cultural identity of Indonesia started to heat up. Previously in Jakarta in 1946, Asrul Sani, Chairil Anwar, Mochtar Apin, M. Akbar Djuhana, M. Balfas, Rivai Apin, Baharuddin Marasutan and Henk Ngantung gathered to form the cultural group, the League of Independent Artists (Gelanggang Seniman Merdeka). The group's aims were only released in February 1950, impressively stating: "We are the true inheritors of the world's culture, and we shall continue this culture in our

own way." The statement not only encouraged Indonesia's cultural involvement on the world's stage, but also acknowledged that the Indonesian national culture project is internationalist. Within this framework, Indonesian culture is seen as formed via a continuous interaction with the world, a heritage continued "in our [Indonesia's] own way."<sup>31</sup>

Several months later, LEKRA was founded in Jakarta on 17 August 1950. At the beginning, LEKRA avoided hostility with foreign cultures: "The essence of progressive foreign cultures will be acquired for the progress of the culture of the Indonesian people."<sup>32</sup> In the ensuing years, artists from LEKRA, often believed to be affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI), reformulated realism into a 1–5–1 guide, to create integration between the artist and the people. The 1–5–1 guide consisted of: a principle of treating "politics as commander"; 5 guides to creation, which were breadth and height, high-quality ideology and aesthetics, combin-



ing tradition with cutting-edge contemporary notions, combining the creativity of the individual with the wisdom of the masses, and combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism; and a method of work, which was to practise *tiga kesamaan* (the three similarities method): working, eating and living in the same manner as poorer farmers and labourers.<sup>33</sup>

Entering the 1960s, the confrontation became messier after a number of intellectuals, painters and poets declared the *Manifesto Kebudayaan* (Cultural Manifesto) in 1963. 38 people from art and journalism circles signed the manifesto, including ITB lecturers Kaboel Suadi, A.D. Pirous, Sanento Yuliman, Gandjar Sakri, Imam Boechori, Aceng Arif and Sunaryo, among others.<sup>34</sup> The manifesto followed universal humanist values, was viewed as oppositional to LEKRA's beliefs, and was a source of conflict between the two groups. In 1964, when the Bandung school announced their support for the *Manifesto Kebudayaan*, accusations of being Western lackeys arose.

The rejection and criticism regarding abstract and Cubist styles intensified. This issue was no longer a problem between academies in Bandung and Yogyakarta, but a problem on the national political stage. In the 1964 National Conference of Art and Literature, D.N. Aidit, head of PKI, cursed: "Abstractionism in the fields of literature and art are forms of aggression of imperialistic culture, conducted through agencies such as USIS, The American Center for Culture, Field Service, Peace Corps and so on."<sup>35</sup>

The situation came to a head in May 1964 when President Sukarno banned the *Manifesto Kebudayaan*, accusing it of neocolonialism and rampant Westernism. The ban received wide support, particularly from LEKRA artists. Afterwards, the debate about the character of Indonesian art and culture waned. Quite a few groups asserted that during this period, the communists and left-leaning artists were pre-

paring to emerge as winners.<sup>36</sup> Then, on 30 September 1965, a bloody coup involving the Army, PKI and President Sukarno occurred.

### Indonesian Painting Does Not Exist

Events in the art world after the 1965 coup, which killed thousands of people accused of communism, were marked by the victory of universal humanism, a celebration of individual expression and the desire to develop wider international relations in art, which were previously silenced by the Sukarno administration.<sup>37</sup> Critic Sudarmadji welcomed the new era, naming it "an era of freedom in creating art."<sup>38</sup> The face of art post-1965 showed a strong tendency to explore new things, mixing traditional art aesthetics with the language of modern painting. We can see this tendency in the works of senior painters such as Sudjojono, Affandi, Agus Djaya, Otto Djaya, G.A. Sukirno, Suroso, Mochtar Apin, Soedibio, Sudarso, Hariadi S., Dullah, Barli, Popo Iskandar, Oesman Effendi, Zaini, Baharudin Marasutan, Nashar, Rusli, Kusnadi, and a number of others.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, it is important to remember the adversity and brutal violence experienced by left-leaning artists and writers after the 1965 coup.<sup>40</sup> Painter Hendra Gunawan was jailed for 12 years at Bandung's Kebon Waru prison, while a darker fate met Trubus Sudarsono, who remains missing to this day. Basuki Resobowo painted in exile in the Netherlands, where he died. The elimination of left-leaning artists from the arena did not, however, quash the East-West debate. In 1969, the debate resurfaced, still revolving around the character of Indonesian painting, and captured the attention of artists and critics. It continued to do so up to the 1990s.

The debate began with a lecture by Oesman Effendi (1919–1985) on 27 August 1969 at the Art Discussion Night held at the Indonesian-American Friendship Institute (Lembaga Pendidikan Indonesia-Amerika, LPIA). In

contrast to his position in the 1950s, Effendi stated that Indonesian painting did not yet exist as there was no “Indonesian stamp” or identity consisting of national characteristics that defined Indonesian art and culture. Painting in Indonesia was merely an imitation of Western painting—the result of following a teacher—and painters were just serving the market. This provocative statement quickly induced reactions. Critic Dan Suwaryono demanded that Effendi prove the existence of Indonesian art or lack thereof via scientific methods.<sup>41</sup> Cultural figure Umar Kayam also responded to the issue, refuting Effendi’s declaration and asserting that “Indonesian art does exist, as it exists today—paintings with all its scribbles.”<sup>42</sup> Kayam also highlighted the importance of realising that Indonesian art was a new culture still undergoing development, and stood apart from traditional culture.

Conversely, writer D.S. Moeljanto appreciated the courage and honesty of Effendi:

Therefore it is correct as Oesman Effendi has stated, that when we had achieved our independence in 1946, when Young Artists Indonesia (SIM) was founded, we had travelled [along] the correct path, but afterwards until today, our compass for painting [has been] pointing in the wrong direction.<sup>43</sup>

Moeljanto also reminded readers that this was not a new debate:

Problems as stated by painter Oesman Effendi [are] actually not [...] new issue[s] in the history of discussing Indonesian painting. The issue of development in Indonesian painting has long been discussed by our art critics, even becoming topics in seminars, discussions or debates. [...] “[T]he existence or not of Indonesian painting” once was a hot topic in a 1956 seminar in Yogyakarta. At the time, paint-

ing figures such as S. Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, Affandi, Trisno Sumardjo, Sudjoko, Amrus Natalsja, and Widayat faced each other and defended their opinions and standing about “the history of Indonesian art.”<sup>44</sup>

Painter Rusli expressed surprise that Effendi was still making an issue of the “Indonesian stamp” in art. He believed one was an Indonesian painter if they 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 paralyse the artist to the point [that] he cannot create.”<sup>45</sup>

Effendi did not stop there. His belief in the absence of Indonesian style in painting was restated in his lecture at the November 1969 Jakarta Art Festival II at Taman Ismail Marzuki, two months after his lecture at LPIA which first triggered the debate. By considering terms like “painting,” “painting in Indonesia,” “Indonesia,” “painters or artists,” “influence” and “modern painting,” Effendi tracked the development of painting from the pre-Japanese, Japanese and post-independence eras. After this, he claimed, Indonesian painting began to lose direction: “Indonesian painting has lost its way. While all this time—regardless of its values—it is based on the impulses of the heart, and the movement of the spirit, lately, many external factors have also defined its direction.”<sup>46</sup>

Effendi did not specify precisely which external factors could divert the direction of Indonesian painting. However, we can guess that they are closely related to actors in the Indonesian art scene such as collectors, critics and galleries. Effendi touched on this issue of external intervention: he called it “judgement from foreigners,” and saw them as meddling in the development of painting by providing help to Indonesia. In Effendi’s view, these “foreigners” assumed: “Since this is a new nation, it must be brought forward. Prove it. Support.

- 41 Dan Suwaryono, "Quo Vadis Oesman Effendi?" [Where are you going Oesman Effendi?], *Kompas*, 6 October 1969.
- 42 Umar Kayam, *Kompas*, 1 September 1969. Author's translation.
- 43 D.S. Moeljanto, *Suara Merdeka*, 23 September 1969. Author's translation.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Rusli, *Sinar Harapan*, 1 October 1969. Author's translation.
- 46 Oesman Effendi's lecture "Seni Lukis di Indonesia Dulu dan Sekarang" [Painting in Indonesia, past and present] was presented at *Diskusi Seni Rupa Pesta Seni Jakarta II*, 7 and 8 November 1969 at the Exhibition Room of di PKJ-TIM, Jakarta Art Council. Excerpt taken from Moetidjo & Hafiz, op. cit., 11. Author's translation.
- 47 Effendi in Moetidjo & Hafiz, *ibid.*, 19.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Sudarmadji, "Indonesian Modern Art," in *Sinar Harapan*, 12 October 1974, unpaginated. Author's translation.
- 50 S. Sudjojono, "Seni Lukis Indonesia Telah Ada Sejak Abad-7" [Indonesian painting existing since the 7<sup>th</sup> century], *Kompas*, 29 August 1979. Sudjojono had also stated his disagreement in response to Effendi's statement two years prior, also in *Kompas*. According to him, acknowledgement of the existence of Indonesian art had already come from France in 1947. See S. Sudjojono, "Seni Lukis Batik Kontemporer Juga Termasuk Seni Lukis" [Contemporary batik painting is also considered art], *Kompas*, 13 August 1977. In it, he stated: "We should not make a problem of identity. We will discover it as we go." Both quotations translated by the author.
- 51 S. Sudjojono, "Jangan Ributkan Soal Orisinalitas!" [Do not argue about the problem of originality!], *Kompas*, 4 November 1977. Author's translation.

Buy. Invite. Giving sweet criticism, you must know, is an incomprehensible manifestation that a nation that did not know anything yesterday, could magically create something that looks exactly like ours."<sup>47</sup>

Effendi believed the "Indonesian stamp" of identity would be attained on its own if the artist diligently and humbly created, following the calling of his spirit. Effendi also believed that the landscape and environment of the artist's surroundings would influence his artistic style, although this process would take time. Eventually, artists would discover their artistic identity and at a certain level of maturity, Indonesian painting would surface. He summed up his position thus: "Therefore, I believe, Indonesian painting is still growing, but does not exist yet, as it is in the process of discovering its unique form."<sup>48</sup> Critic Sudarmadji voiced his support of Effendi's position, asserting that "painting as we know it today, painting upon canvas and enjoyed without any relation with religious, mystical ceremonies, is *an sich* [per se] a Western influence."<sup>49</sup>

Sudjojono, however, naturally disputed Effendi:

That is nonsense! If there are Indonesian painters, and they have works, have the vocabulary and these Indonesian painters are of a good social standing, then the life of Indonesian painting does exist. And if the life of Indonesian painting exists, how could one say Indonesian painting does not?<sup>50</sup>

Sudjojono, who rebutted Hopman in 1947, strongly believed that painting in Indonesia had existed since the 7<sup>th</sup> century and developed clearly until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. From that point onwards, however, Indonesian painting had its ups and downs. Sudjojono ventured that to prove its existence, "One did not need to search as far as the rural areas to locate Indonesian painting."<sup>51</sup>

Mara Karma, a painter, attempted to find the middle ground. He thought that Effendi's statement was not a manifesto, not even a statement meant to act as a new premise of the dis-

- 52 Mara Karma, "Oesman Effendi dan 'Tjap'-nja" [Oesman Effendi and his "stamp"], *Harian Kami*, October 1969. Author's translation.
- 53 Sides Sudyarto D.S., "Seni Lukis Indonesia Merindukan Pengadilan" [Indonesian painting demands for a trial], *Kompas*, 31 December 1974. Author's translation.
- 54 Oesman Effendi, "Orang Sederhana dari Pedalaman" [Ordinary people from the hinterland], *Tempo*, 16 April 1977. Excerpt taken from Moetidjo & Hafiz, op. cit., 7.
- 55 Soedarso S.P., "Isu Tentang Keindonesiaan Bangkit Lagi" [The issue of Indonesian-ness rises again]. Taken from clippings of *Laporan Bentara Budaya*, March 1985 (no other publication details are available). Author's translation.
- 56 S. Sudjojono, "Seni Rupa yang Menjawab Tantangan Masa Kini" [Art that challenges the present], a lecture presented at the symposium *Indonesian Art Today*, 10–28 June 1985. Author's translation.
- 57 Sanento Yuliman, "Mencari Indonesia dalam Seni Lukis Indonesia" [Looking for Indonesia in Indonesian Art], *Budaya Djaya*, November 1969 as republished in *Dua Seni Rupa: Sepilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman* [Two Arts: The compilation of Sanento Yuliman's papers], ed. Asikin Hasan (Jakarta: Yayasan Kalam, 2001), 65–6. Author's translation.
- 58 Based on Jim Supangkat & Sanento Yuliman, *G. Sidharta di Tengah Seni Rupa Indonesia* [G. Sidharta in the midst of Indonesian art] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1982), 29–32. Author's translation.

course surrounding Indonesian painting. He also believed the statement was not the introduction of a new school of thought:

What came out of his mouth that night at LPIA last September was merely a slip of the tongue. Oesman Effendi quietly admitted this to people or friends whom he thought he could talk with discreetly. Apparently, Effendi himself did not realise what he said at that time. Despite having a concept beforehand, when the time to speak came, he forgot about it. What came later—says the storyteller—were “voices” that came from within him. That is how this controversial statement came about.<sup>52</sup>

The charge about the lack of an “Indonesian stamp” in painting, as levelled by Hopman in 1947 and Effendi in 1969, became a latent problem, prone to surfacing at any time. In the mid-1970s, poet Sides Sudyarto D.S. began his report:

Approaching the end of 1974, an old question proposed by an Oesman Effendi remains alive in official and unofficial discus-

sions: “What defines Indonesian painting?” And the answers, of course, are not all in agreement with the painter, humble as he is, but has received a lot of bad sentiment by saying “Indonesian painting does not exist.” It seems that any answer is not sufficient. In reality, the opinion that questions the existence of Indonesian painting has filled every pore of consciousness of the observers and enthusiasts of our painting.<sup>53</sup>

Over seven years later, Effendi himself continued to comment on the matter:

In previous years I said that there is no “Indonesian stamp,” as I saw the tendencies in painting based on thoughts that originate from outside us. Man is the child of his environment. Picasso, for instance, said to be accepted all over the world, could not release himself from Spanish lands. For me, land is the same as the blood of the men living upon it.<sup>54</sup>

Effendi felt that the shapes on the canvas could lead one to the development of Indonesian characteristics. It was these basics that were

more apparent in Western painting and absent in Indonesian painting, and that had yet to be explored by Indonesian painters.

Several years later, this issue remained up for debate. At a workshop titled *Temu Seniman* (The artists' gathering) at Purna Budaya, Yogyakarta in February 1985, art academic Soedarso S.P. brought up "Oesman Effendi's denial," elaborating on the issue:

People everywhere are in confusion in the search to discover what is the feeling, meaning and characteristics that are Indonesia. I believe Indonesian painting already exists; yet we are still formulating it, on what defines Indonesian painting. If it has not been discovered, we should not say it does not exist. The paintings have existed for a while, so why should we say Indonesian painting does not exist?<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, in a lecture in Solo during the mid-1980s, Sudjojono continued to respond seriously to Effendi:

Indonesian painting exists. So if Oesman Effendi says that Indonesian painting does not exist, it is incorrect [...] as the nation of Indonesia accepted PERSAGI as a national movement, and its artist members strengthened the spirit of nationalism through their work, therefore the art belongs to us. It is a tool of our expression, to express our thoughts. It is the literature, poetry and *kinanti* [song] of our nation. So our art is once again used after being forgotten for centuries, in a new form with an impressive style and creative power. This symptom is an atavism, [a return to] a characteristic heritage resulting from hundreds of years of the nation's culture.<sup>56</sup>

Of the various reactions, critic Sanento Yuliman framed the fact of the matter with greater clarity. He stated: "The new painting

developing in Indonesia is undeniably 'Indonesian Painting.' It means it is shaped by the historical legacy of Indonesia. True, it does not stand firm as it relies on weak support pillars. It is isolated in the large cities, further isolated to [only be] part of the educated and rich."<sup>57</sup>

Effendi had become increasingly lonely since his declaration that "Indonesian painting does not exist" sparked rigorous debate. He was attacked from all sides and criticised for being blind to all the existing developments in painting. His search for unique, Indonesian characteristics was considered ridiculous in these modern times. The bulk of Effendi's thoughts failed to engage or be understood: people latched on to only this notion of "unique characteristics," taking it to mean anything originating from Indonesia, such as cultural products which were then placed on canvasses. There was even a quip that one just needed to place the red and white flag on the canvas to make the painting "Indonesian."<sup>58</sup>

During the anti-communist New Order regime, abstract painting grew in popularity and received strong political endorsement, thanks to support from the Bandung school of thought. The style was deemed innocuous, apolitical and did not represent anything from reality; the canvas was seen as a flat plane that must be freed from the narrative needs of the artist. Aside from being associated with modernity, abstract paintings were considered congruent with the spirit of the nation's development. Such art had no difficulty finding homes in the houses of the rich and offices of private and government-owned enterprises. These paintings, which were actually difficult to understand, were suddenly associated with the intellectual capacity of the artist and the appreciator. This was most likely politically engineered, to subjugate the artistic preferences of the public and silence the potential for criticism.

Since the abstract style was associated with modernity, those who did not paint in this style were considered old-fashioned or obsolete. In

his first solo exhibition at Balai Budaya, Jakarta, at the end of 1968, Sudjojono's paintings were mocked for being outdated. "It is strange, that I am now accused of being not modern, behind the times, when it was I that encouraged the development of modern art," he complained.<sup>59</sup> The issues of "modernity in art" and "Indonesian modern art" muddled the discourse during these times. After 1965, the Bandung school of thought felt that they were following the correct course: this is Indonesian art! In that aspect, Indonesian modern art was very much a part of the global art community's belief that modern art manifested the aspirations of modern man. This belief was, naturally, regarded as much too arrogant.

Semsar Siahaan, an artist from a younger generation, finally questioned the notion that Indonesian modern art had succeeded in synthesising ethnic styles with Western abstraction. His ideas about art were judged as a reflection of the art ideology followed by the LEKRA artists during the 1950s. Semsar Siahaan was a student at ITB who had shocked the academic world when he burnt to ash a sculpture by his professor, Sunaryo. He held that the burning was an event in art and titled it *Oleh-oleh Dari Desa 2* (1981), a protest against the exploitation of primitive art of ethnic minorities by Indonesian modern artists, especially the artist-professors in the academic circles of ITB.<sup>60</sup>

Effendi left Jakarta for his hometown in West Sumatra, never to publicly comment on the existence of Indonesian painting again. Yet he was not alone. There was another artist who had also questioned the identity of Indonesian art: Gregorius Sidharta Soegijio, a popular figure from the West-leaning Bandung school of thought.<sup>61</sup> 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 would like to search for the local values of Indonesia."<sup>62</sup>

Nationalist painters such as Agus Djaya, Sudjojono, Suromo, Basuki Resobowo, Baharuddin Marasutan, Trisno Sumardjo and Oesman Effendi were, in their time, defenders who persistently fought attacks directed towards Indonesian painting. They came to accept Western influences on art and its prevalence as an inevitable reality of the times. These painters realised that Indonesian modern art was neither a transformation nor a continuation of the traditional art of any ethnic group.<sup>63</sup> New Indonesian painting, in their view, was an art that shaped its own traditions and established its autonomy.<sup>64</sup> However, these turn of events and conclusions were not as simple as we imagine.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Nusantara region was represented by all things calm, fresh, peaceful and full of romance. People did not realise that beneath the depictions of lush forests, fertile lands, clear rivers, open skies and diligent workers toiling in harmony, as if all was under control, lay colonial aggression and the establishment of Western supremacy. Paintings, lithographic prints and etchings were filled with the visual vocabulary of those times and were the roots of the style popularly known as *Mooi Indië* (beautiful Indies). This would later be vilified by Sudjojono in the 1930s; because these were "representations of the East," the authentic East could not be said to exist. "The authentic East," in these images, was the East sucked dry by colonialism, oppressed by the expansion of the capitalism of Western countries. Painters who were cognisant of this perspective were encouraged by Sudjojono in 1939 to also paint sugarcane factories, skinny farmers, cars owned by the wealthy, urban fashion and the changing social realities of Indonesia.

While Sudjojono aggressively discredited the dogma of colonial painting, he did not suggest for painters to return to the notion of the East in their work, being a proponent of

- 59 Bur Rasuanto, "Pertemuan dengan S. Sudjojono" [Meeting with S. Sudjojono], *Indonesia Raya*, no. 253, 15 December 1968. Author's translation.
- 60 Miklouho-Maklai, *op. cit.*, 103–6.
- 61 Supangkat & Yuliman, *op. cit.*, 33.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 20–35.
- 63 Sanento Yuliman, "Kelahiran Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia" [The birth of modern Indonesian art], in Hasan, *op. cit.*, 55.
- 64 Hasan, *op. cit.*
- 65 Sudjojono, *Seni Loekis, Kesenian dan Seniman*, 6–9.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 13–4.

"painting that is not searching for the beauty of past times."<sup>65</sup> To Sudjojono, the "East" was one that had been frozen into orientalist museum artefacts, a consequence of Western modernity that had uprooted art, alienated it from its people and placed it in museums. Sudjojono had little faith in such institutions, declaring: "Museums will not help much."<sup>66</sup> These suspicions of Western modernity were justifiable, evinced, he believed, by the inauthenticity of the East as presented in Jakarta museums, being merely Western narratives and interpretations of the East. It is true that the founding of Eastern nations like Indonesia arose out of the shadows of Western might in the guise of colonialism. The political implications of this attitude of superiority rejected the validity of any modern order outside the West, subsuming them into Western hegemony. Sudjojono's suspicion towards Western modernity was thus read as suspicion towards Orientalism.

The effects of Effendi's denial clearly transcended time; every artist in the two decades following his denial responded to the issue in his or her own way. The Design Center Association (Decenta) group formed in 1973, for instance, succeeded in creating a synthesis of East and West through their work in silkscreen and pioneered this technique in the Indonesian art scene. The experiments and exploration of ornamentation and mythology, Indonesian popular culture icons and Pop Art in works by G. Sidharta, T. Susanto, A.D. Pirous, Diddo

Kusnidar and Priyanto Sunarto from Decenta were deemed to offer new inspiration to the young artists.

The discourse surrounding the character of Indonesian art resurfaced at the Black December Manifesto of 1974, questioned by young artists who were part of the New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, GSRB) in 1975, and then criticised by the What Personality (Kepribadian Apa or PiPa) group in 1977. The East–West discourse continued to be debated until the early 1990s. The wound caused by Hopman's denial in 1947 was reopened 40 years later, when several modern art museums in Europe and America declined to exhibit Indonesian modern painting. This rejection is clear indication that until the 1990s, the existence of Indonesian modern painting remained unacknowledged.

What we understand as the identity of Indonesian art is full of contradictions and confrontations which are difficult to unravel. Myriad statements attempting to tell what actually happened and why only succeed in making one thing clear: the identity of Indonesian art, at its core, still faces a complex, serious problem. Its mode of discourse consists of a convoluted web of acculturation and enculturation processes, and the sheer amount of participants and actors involved means every process has to factor in manifold points of view. A much sharper structuring and interpretation of its history is needed in the future.