

ASIA NOW: Under Construction?

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The theme "Under Construction" was chosen as a means of entering a discussion of what "Asianness" is today. Although the term "identity" is perhaps too strong and carries with it "suspicion" concerning the desire to chase after the "other" and seeking out "difference," the search for Asianness is an effort to build and construct an identity. On the other hand, the reality of Asianness is represented by diverse realities that may not relate, and may even conflict. In addition, Asian identity is certainly not free from the shadow of classic sentiments regarding East-West relations.

The Asia of today is not necessarily identical with the East. Today Asia is a world of continuous change, but also is demonstrated by tendencies of self-destruction, through intra-national conflicts and internal conflicts enflamed by religious and ethnic differences, or in different terms, a difference of identities. The theme Under Construction certainly can be read as something that wishes to see Asia as something in the process of creation, something that is truly happening in many Asian countries today. Development can be translated as an attempt to create an urban cosmopolitan society supported by industry and information-technology. Under Construction, a group exhibition between Asian countries in Tokyo is clearly not free from the institutions and physical infrastructure of its supporters. This source of support can be seen as a sign of public desire for such organizations. This program was carried out in such a situation. These ideas about identity, has given rise to the existence of the aforementioned supporting institutions, including events such as exhibitions which also are a characteristic of cosmopolitan society's, and we can see this especially in developed countries.

Regularly organized exhibitions are not just the property of developed countries, but in terms of quantity and quality, public interest and support may be something that takes place more smoothly in developed countries. However, it does not work in this way in developing countries like Indonesia. Here it is still hard to say if there is a public need for contemporary art exhibitions. The artists included in this exhibition, and the organizing of local exhibitions is still somewhat of an anomaly, or at best, a vague aspect of society in Indonesia's large cities. Therefore, if we try to see the practice and mediation of art as a possible site for that identity itself, then the exhibition "Under Construction" faces a dilemma.

The Practice of Contemporary Art as Identity

How can we hope to locate Asianness and how far can a comprehension of Asianness be constructed, if what is called Asia is a geopolitical region among many nations? In other words, how far can an understanding of Asianness as a possible site of identity go beyond the awareness of nationality? Connected with "Under Construction" is the question of how far Contemporary art can at this point reflect this understanding? This in turn concerns the artist's comprehension regarding the issue of Asianness. Employing the principle of cultural determination, whatever the symbolic cultural practice, contemporary art for example, that occurs within this cultural environment automatically becomes a legitimate representation of the dominating culture that produced it. If this is so, then whatever an artist from an Asian country produces underscores the work's potential as a representation of Asianness. This of course includes risking the difficulty of trying to find common characteristics associated with Asianness, due to the diversity of simultaneous social, political and cultural conditions in the region called Asia.

What aspects of culture that reflect a shared Asian characteristic can encompass as many nations as possible? Would not the answer to this question point to the essentializing of cultural stereotypes, and maybe also to aspects of culture not found just in Asia? This is one of the risks that cannot be avoided.

The theme Under Construction indicates the desire to be seen as a process, perhaps

connected to the spirit of construction. Development in the era of globalization has more or less resulted in a metropolitan society that is also cosmopolitan. Depending on local factors of education and need, larger cities around the world generally take the infrastructures of more developed cities as their model. One of the signs of a "cultured" city is an infrastructure that can support cultural events. In this type of system, art museums become an important part of the culture and identity of large cosmopolitan cities. Its existence suggests that a city society is a "cultured" society. Therefore, the theme Under Construction, can be seen as a critical and reflective attitude toward whether its "existence" has really already become part of a common identity with similar features among Asian countries.

Contemporary art, as a field of symbolic cultural practice, is believed to represent a large part of cultural reality. Hence, the relation between these two arenas mentioned above, and the mechanism, as well as capacity for reading it may be an important issue pointing to large differences between developed and rich countries and poorer and developing countries like Indonesia. Awareness of this problem makes it difficult to take for granted the important position of contemporary art in Indonesia — i.e. as if it were in the same position as that being produced in developed countries.

In a critical attempt to examine Asianness, via contemporary art, we should first question how far this desire goes in Asian countries. Has the desire to seek Asianness on a transnational level developed at the same pace or along with the presence and presentation of contemporary art? The answer points to an asymmetrical situation. At the same time, those countries possessing an art infrastructure are capable of developing strong contemporary art, as well as being able to accommodate itself to global trends in organizing art exhibitions.

Changes and developments in contemporary art, like it or not, have already forced shifts in the patterns and expanded the function of art exhibitions. This is especially apparent in large museum exhibitions in developed countries. Museums are no longer the sole gatekeepers of values, as in the contexts of modern art. Such thinking has been rendered largely defunct by the diverse and cross border practices of contemporary art, which in turn results in exhibitions referring to a diverse range of presentations well. This more or less is in keeping with the orientation points of an expanding public for contemporary art. Right now, anything can be offered up as legitimate for contemporary art exhibitions. This wide range of possibilities makes it feasible to attract public attention and provide satisfaction and entertainment that differs from what is offered by the entertainment industry itself. This is because something unexpected can be offered, a mode of exhibiting that is often not in line with public expectations about the presentation of art — because it is interesting to the public. Within this plurality, there is always a field or pattern that emerges as the dominant trend. This trend in contemporary art then ties in with the method, or better yet, the strategy behind exhibitions. Large exhibitions generally explore this trend and attempt to develop a new approach as a means of creating yet another overarching trend. Luckily there is always a new trend from which some new trend will follow. However, this has not surfaced in Indonesia, except in alternative spaces with minimal facilities and cut-off from public awareness.

Its entertainment potential for a wider public is usually accompanied by a "seriousness" in distinguishing and positioning the value of an exhibition. This is certainly linked to the interests of a smaller group or associated with smaller audiences. Every exhibition of contemporary art must emphasize such values and interests, the justification of which lies in the hands of the exhibition organizers — specifically those of the curator. In the process of creating discourses around an exhibition or work of art, discussions about aesthetics are often left behind. Repeatedly works of art are treated as objects of semiotics that usually approaches its objects employing academic literary criticism, as well as a cultural studies approach. Hence, works of art become artifacts for cultural discourse that are often academic and difficult to access. On the other hand, this tendency also positions art objects as equally valid with other visual expressions, such as advertisements, television and film. As a result, works of art become the infrastructure for discussions of conceptual and cultural studies theories. In many cases artists seem content with this possibility. This is evident in the popularity of electronic media most often used for transmitting entertainment. On the other hand, this also proves art's potential as text that can be related to the dominant culture that shapes and influences it. This situation is proven even more clearly in the popular use of everyday objects in contemporary art, not with a Duchampian agenda, but as the artist's commentary concerning dominant culture. Of course this tendency can be positioned as counter culture, a representation of subculture, but it can also be seen as an affirmation of the current dominant culture.

Although the tendency of reading works as texts has also emerged in Indonesia, this has not given rise to a comprehensive discourse, and has become an important and significant priority to only a few producers of art. This is because an interdisciplinary and constructive discourse has yet to



develop in Indonesia, such that contemporary art practice cannot take much benefit from such a sporadic and arbitrary discourse.

The recent formation of institutions that can support exhibitions, as well as exhibitions themselves, is quite significant in formulating the importance of contemporary art practice. As Hans Belting argues: "Contemporary art would not only be homeless without the museum, it would also be voiceless and invisible." [1]

If that is the case, it is easy to gauge the position of contemporary art within the Indonesia public itself. Art as part of an urban society's identity, in the case of Indonesia, has little effect and is an activity with little significance. The conclusion: Contemporary art is an identity absent from the public in the large cities of Indonesia.

Dream Project: Under Construction

As the Indonesian delegation, the theme Under Construction is likely to be a rather ironic one, if the reality artists face is a condition Under Deconstruction, or Under Rupture. However, it is probably not necessary to discuss Indonesia's flaws. The problem is how to simultaneously locate both the importance and problems of Indonesian artists' connection to international and regional exhibitions. This issue has been around for a while in Indonesia, concerning the circulation of some Indonesian artists who are better known in international art forums than in their own country. Certainly we can always find an artist capable of representing Indonesia in regional and international art arenas. However, does the existence of this small number of contemporary artists and curators truly represent a symbolic cultural practice of Indonesia itself?

Question: Do they stand for and represent the reality of art itself in Indonesia if their presence is an anomaly and they are not known or understood by their own public in Indonesia? This means that Indonesian artists and their works have failed to find a context in the first place, namely the important factor of their existence within their own public arenas. An artist's connection in this marginalized zone is often seen as an opportunity to present artistic developments from countries that up until now have been marginalized in the international field. Previous exclusion of artists from developing countries was based on the notion that what they produced was out of date in developing countries and thus marginalized. The process of internationalization for some third world artists in the last few years has given rise to the marginal-international artist [2], whose works are different enough from most "marginal" works that are actually better known and supported by the local public. In other words, the "marginal" is more appropriate to represent local developments. If the artist's involvement involves local curators, then this presents a dilemma for the curator as well, should they choose marginal-international artists or the marginal? It can be assumed that they will select those artists whose work is more in-tune with trends from the center, or new centers. This can happen by selecting marginal-international artists who already have reputations or search for new talent that fills the required criteria.

However, presenting marginal-international artists in countries where Indonesian artists are often exhibited is also a mistake, because it is often the same artists who are circulated. Besides that, their work is filled with sociopolitical content that perhaps has already become an old hat after ten years of overexposure in regional/international circuits. At the same time, the theme Under Construction is an optimistic theme. Enthusiasm or optimism is an attitude that is hard to come by in Indonesia lately. In other words, the understanding of Under Construction is perhaps something that has become absent from Indonesian artists' comprehensions.

Under Construction as a local exhibition in Indonesia was organized as a project with the title "Dream Project: Under Construction." A cynical and critical title about the condition of contemporary art, it indicates simultaneously two things: one, that at this moment in time the hope that the existence and support of contemporary art practice will become an important aspect of the identity of society in Indonesia's bigger cities is still a dream. Two, that although only a dream, this must continue to be developed in order to maintain the conviction — for all sides concerned — of the continuation of contemporary art practice, and in this, the dream can be translated as hope. In a pragmatic way, Dream Project, initiated with the building of a gallery space, is a real attempt to create a mediation space for contemporary art to grow — from the limited activities of alternative spaces that already exist — with hopes that one day, contemporary art practice will become a necessity for the public, and become an aspect of cosmopolitan society in large cities in Indonesia.

[1] Hans Belting, "Art and Art History in the New Museum: The Search for a New Identity," *Art & Design*, 48: *Painting in The Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Ed. David Moss), (London: Academy Group Ltd, 1996), p. 34

[2] The term 'marginal-international' used by Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities, Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation," *Thinking about Exhibitions*, (Ed. Reesa Greenberg), (London: Routledge, 1996), p.33