Yvonne Spielmann, *Contemporary Indonesian Art. Artists, Art Spaces, and Collectors*

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By Antonio J. Guerreiro *

The author, Professor Yvonne Spielmann, has over thirty years of experience in research, teaching and knowledge transfer in the Higher Education at international level across Europe, the US, and Southeast Asia. She has established interdisciplinary approaches in media and culture, technology, art, and communication, instigating research networks with partners in South-East Asia. Until she researched Indonesian Contemporary Art, she specialized on the study of video and electronic media art.

This English edition of her book is the second edition of the book which has been expanded and updated from the original German (Spielman 2015). The publication of the book was supported by the Centre for Contemporary Art at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore while the author was a research fellow at this institution. This slight, innovating work, covers the ground between conventional art books and academic studies on art using either a theoretical framework or a sociological approach (Thornton 2008). It is structured in three main chapters addressing related topics:

1. Contextualising Indonesian Art in Southeast Asia in terms of cultural and “situational” conditions;
2. “Positions in Indonesian Modern and Contemporary art” examines the transitions from the pre-modern to modern and contemporary trends through the prism of influential artists, art schools and spaces;
3. “Aesthetic of Reflection and Transformation” focuses on individual artist’s journeys (twelve artist profiles are presented including a collective made of two persons, *Indie Guerrillas*).

Prof. Spielmann has chosen to concentrate on a few key artists profiles rather than doing a wider coverage such as the one published recently and listing over 70 Indonesian contemporary artists (see Ciclitira 2011).

Although the market and related factors such auction houses sales, influential magazines and the curatorship of Indonesian contemporary art in the country and abroad, are not addressed in a distinct chapter, the author provides hints about these in Chapter 2 (101ff) and elsewhere. The book stresses rather the development of art networks and artist’s fairs in Java devoted to contemporary art following the Reformasi period (1998-2001). This well documented chapter considers “Collections and galleries” (72-91) and “Art spaces, media and artists’ fairs” (92-102). This is the strongest chapter of the book and the most researched through interviews and exchanges with the actors involved in these fields: critics, curators, artists and also philanthropists (see Acknowledgements, viii). The art spaces, art fairs, private museums and galleries have taken the lead in contemporary art shows as government institutions are less active in this field, e.g. Galeri Nasional Indonesia in Jakarta and provincial museums (86-87). The leading ARTJOG fair, which began in 2008 in Yogyakarta (Jogja), is organized on an annual basis (199-102). The introductory Chapter (1-48) establishes useful comparisons on the regional level about general trends in art within ASEAN countries and globalization, contrasting Indonesia with Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. Contrasts and similarities are explored by the author, furthermore she gives a special attention to gender issues with a detailed section on Contemporary women artists in Indonesia (15-22). At this point, the author stresses the current spaces of performance, installation, video and multimedia as salient in Indonesian
contemporary arts. In this line she selected the work of outstanding artists in this field (FX Harsono, Mella Jaarsma, Agus Suwage, Melati Suryodarmo, Tintin Wulia) outlined in Chapter three. But she covers as well other contemporary artists using more traditional mediums, such as painting and drawing (Nasirun, Jumaldi Ali) at the exception of sculpture. The subjective choices of the author are relevant to the current art scene in the country. I remark in passing that contemporary photography and its practice in Indonesia have been overlooked by current studies on contemporary Indonesian arts and it is also true of this book. The author did not consider the specificity of Indonesian camera work, which is represented by exhibitions organized at the Galeri Antara in Jakarta and a few other venues in the country. On the other hand, some Indonesian contemporary artists are making use of photography, including colonial archival imagery, such as Agan Hararap’s (b. 1980) display at the Singapore Biennale 2016, called *Mardijker Photo Studio* or Octora’s installation (b. 1982 in Bandung) at Europalia Exhibition 2017 combining screen print photographs, fabric and performance, focused on a Balinese dancers’ outfit.

Generally, the political and economic questions relating to the “boom” of Indonesian modern/contemporary art taking place during and after the Reformasi transition, ca. 1998-2010, are touched upon in the book. The data presented in the book reflects mostly the period when Prof. Spielmann began to study Indonesian artists and their social milieu after 2008. I cannot help noticing that the special position of Balinese artists in the modern and contemporary periods is not addressed through the book. Quoting Helena Spanjaard (1993), she considers them as outside Contemporary Indonesian art discourses according to the historical context (63). Located on the “periphery,” the networks of galleries and Museums in Bali have constructed their own identities and spaces since the colonial period, distinct from that of Java, the main socio-cultural “centre” or pusat in Indonesia. Clearly artists from Bali, such as the influential Made Wianta (b. 1949) and Madé Djirna, are missing here.

The main argument of Professor Spielmann’s book, i.e. that Indonesian contemporary art must be seen according to its own local “meanings” is relevant. Significantly conceptual expressions by contemporary artists do challenge the established aesthetic representations by mingling hybrid elements and styles. In terms of postcolonial situation, the artists’ creations presented in the recent Europalia Arts Festival in Brussels—alongside Dutch and Belgian contemporary artists—, where Indonesia was invited in 2017, complete Spielmann book on several points defining the historical interactions between Europe and Indonesia, and generally about the “roots” of Indonesia’s modern and contemporary arts. While the Indonesian pavilion at Venise Biennale referred by the author, provides a comprehensive survey of the shifts and trends within Indonesian contemporary art, connecting it to the international art scene (92-101). She rightly stresses that it provides a counter narrative to “Western-oriented art history” discourses, reworking the paradigms of diversity and synchronicity in producing many worlds and counter-worlds (59-60). It appears also in the burgeoning urban scene of street artists and “pop murals”—connecting various socio-political and aesthetic themes—made in public places, especially active in Yogyakarta and Surabaya. More generally, from an art history perspective, the processes that took place in the late Sukarno era, before the establishment of Suharto New Order régime (orde baru) in 1966-1967 and the long running debate on the “role of culture” (polemik kebudayaan) in Indonesia had an impact on contemporary art. Since the early 1950s the internationalist Seni Rupa school in Bandung, in contrast to the nationalist Yogyakarta...
karta Art academy (ASRI) acknowledged Western influences (see 67-73). At the same time the leftist artists from LEKRA, rejecting the idea of an “universalist” culture, advocated the importance of local social conditions and representations in developing social consciousness in the country. Historically, it connected also to the building up of the State and the Pancasila ideology as the foundation of the country (azas tunggal) since Sukarno’s period of “Guided democracy” initiated in 1957, and later under the Suharto régime until the early 1990s. These currents seem to have merged embracing both tradition and modernity streams (75, see also Spanjaard 1993). Now the colliding trends of globalization and local values can be felt as well in the creations of contemporary artists that reflect on fragmented ethnic/cultural/gender identities as well on environmental/urban issues in the country. Indonesian artists relying on the country’s rich cultural diversity are challenging the Malay Muslim, Chinese or Javanese heritage (kejawan), in regard to contemporary mediums of expressions and hybridity within a postmodernist Southeast Asian art scene (44-48). In this regard, the iconic themes of Heri Dono (b. 1960) and his connection to the symbolic meanings of wayang imagery are characteristic (131-139) as Entang Wiharso and Javanese visual culture or Yuli Prayitno’s bricolage and his uses of Chinese calligraphy (142-144). The author’s analyses refer holistically to the role of religion and ethnicity in the Indonesian context that inspires contemporary artists (Chapters 2 and 3).

In short, Prof. Spielmann’s elegant book, despite its shortcomings, provides an overview of the most recent cracks within Indonesian contemporary art, and its relevance not only in Asia but on the global art scene. The book focuses on the urban nexus of Java: Jakarta, Bandung and Jogjakarta in connection to art schools, art fairs and collectors. It reframes the debate on coloniality/modernity in regard to art productions in Indonesia pointing at hybridity in art discourses, the post-colonial body and gender (3-7). What the author calls the “de-Westernisation of aesthetics and discourse” (105). This approach add visibility to the works of Indonesian artists currently shown in Asia and elsewhere, reaching to a global audience outside of Indonesia. The processes of contemporary creation in Indonesia stemmed in part from the transformation of tradition and popular culture that culminated in new artistic styles in the 1990s. By and large, it can be compared with the positions of African contemporary artists during the last decades of the 20th century that produced a “Decolonisation of art” (Littlefield-Kasir 1999: Chap. 6, 166 ff). She also remarks on the crucial role of private museums, such as the one developed by Dr. Hong Djien Oei, a physician living in the small town of Magelang, near Jogja in central Java (HDO Museum, 11-13). Dr. Oei, a charismatic man, was involved in exhibitions and art shows across Java and he sponsored many events. His collection of modern and contemporary art was partly published—2012 a,b in the bibliography (174), although Helena Spanjaard’s book on HDO Museum collection is not listed—, he had a tremendous influence on both collectors and curators in the country.

To conclude, a word about the superb editing and layout of the book by NIAS/NUS Press which read easily and balances the illustrations and text in a format that is also handy to carry, a fact which cannot be said of many art books. The quality of the numerous colour photographs should be praised. An index completes the volume. On the other hand, the bibliography is rather basic and could have been augmented with benefit, giving a larger coverage of essays, art magazines and Indonesian publications, as only English language sources are listed. As a reference work, the book will be useful to students of art, especially to those interested in postcolonial issues, and generally
to specialists of Southeast Asian popular cultures.

Notes

1. It should be noted that her book, Video, the Reflexive Medium (2008), was rewarded the 2009 Lewis Mumford Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Technics; compare Paul (2003).

2. In 2018 after ten years ARTJOG boasts 54 international and Indonesian participants, while other fringe programmes include curatorial tours, meeting the artists and a “Young Artists award”, especially designed for those below 33 years old. The theme of this year is “Enlightenment: Towards various futures”. During the fair, which lasts almost a month, daily performances are taking place with individuals and group performers.

3. The Galeri Foto Jurnalisk Antara (the Antara Museum of Photojournalism) which opened in 1992, however the temporary exhibitions have a larger scope, integrating aesthetics and technology in photographic work. It is the only Museum devoted solely to photography in Indonesia. It features the work of both local and international photographers. See jktgo.com/activities/galeri-foto-jurnalisk-antara; on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/gja/?hl=id.

4. The various contributions by contemporary critics and artists contextualise Indonesian social history and art: starting from Raden Saleh academic painting style (1830-1870), the “Coprosperity sphere” productions under the Japanese occupation, Batak identity during colonial and post-colonial periods, architecture (Hôtel des Indes art décó building) and the massacre of Chinese in Java in 1947 (FX Harsono, b. 1949) besides other topics (Europalia 2017: 20-68).

5. Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, literally the Institute’s for the People’s Culture created in 1950 was under the influence of the Indonesian communist party (PKI), in 1963 it had a membership of 100.000 and 200 offices across in the country. After the October 1st 1965 coup (Gerakan 30 September) it was disbanded by the Suharto régime, see Cribb (1992, entries LEKRA; “Pancasila”: 340-342; “Azas Tunggal” [sole principle]: 33). Jim Supangkat reflected on the social critical content of contemporary art before Reformasi (Supangkat 1999: 70-73).

6. On the other hand Eko Nugroho’ work—born in Yogyakarta 1977—is inspired by comics and graffiti, he realizes murals with political and satirical themes that parallel wayang figures and other Indonesian popular icons adding texts as well. His work would have deserved a profile in Prof. Spielmann’s book. See Trans-figurations. Mythologies indonésiennes (2011: 30-33).

7. The late I Nyoman Gunarsa (1944-2017) opened his personal Museum of Contemporary Indonesian painting, including some modern works in 2016 on the grounds of his private Museum in Klungkung, Bali. It complements the Museum of Classical Balinese Painting—Nyoman Gunarsa Museum (NGM)—which was created in 1994 and renovated in 2010 (see Mann 2011).

8. The bilingual Indonesian-English magazines published in Jakarta, Visual Arts—since 2004 and Arti were influential through the period considered by the book, see http://www.visualartsmagazine.info.

References


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Le genre des « Mélanges en l’honneur de... » est assez répandu dans les institutions universitaires lorsqu’un de ses membres se retire. Les limites en sont bien connues, l’hétérogénéité des contributions, et cet ouvrage-ci les atteint, comme d’autres. Son originalité tient au fait que l’homme en l’honneur duquel ces Mélanges ont été rassemblés n’a jamais occupé aucune position dans l’Université française : leur publication s’explique donc moins par la convention professionnelle que par l’amitié et la pugnacité d’Alain Ruscio, qui doit en être remercié.

Pour autant, l’édition est loin de respecter les normes habituelles de la littérature scientifique : notes et bibliographies ne sont pas harmonisées, ni l’emploi des caractères et les fautes de frappe vraiment trop nombreuses, qu’elles soient purement typographiques (Boninains pour Bouinains, p. 368, Alfred Erenest Babut de la table des matières...), ou qu’elles affectent le sens (autour des années 70 pour autour des années 30 ou « Lettrés-Résidants » pour « Lettrés-résistants », p. 369, Kuh Luoc pour Kinh Luoc, p. 371). Sur le fond, le recueil apparaît comme un instantané de l’état des recherches sur le Vietnam vers 2010, mais logiquement limité aux générations de Charles Fourniau et de ses étudiants. De ce point de vue, il est dommage qu’une liste des travaux de Charles Fourniau n’ait pu être présentée.


La disparité des textes entraîne une difficulté à rendre compte de cet ouvrage, surtout pour une revue scientifique spécialisée comme *Moussons*. Je les classerais volontiers en deux familles : celle de ses étudiants ou de ceux qu’il a aidés, d’une part, ceux de ses pairs, d’autre part. Pour autant, je ne sais où classer le texte de Patrice Jorland (« Harmonie sous la voûte céleste », 59-79) qui esquisse une analyse de la géopolitique asiatique dans la longue durée, texte qui...