

## THE INDONESIAN PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE, 2013.

Susan Ingham, December 2013

Indonesian artists became increasingly aware of developments in international contemporary art in the 1990s particularly through contact with international survey exhibitions, biennales and triennials that have proliferated since then. The first biennale, and template of all the others, was the Venice Biennale and, by the 2000s, Indonesian artists and other members of the Indonesian art world sought recognition for Indonesian art in this, the foremost and certainly the longest running regular exhibition of international contemporary art.

The official website for the Indonesian pavilion is: <http://www.indonesiavenice.com/>

Click here for the [curatorial essay](#) by Carla Bianpoen and Rifky Effendy and an article by [Carla Bianpoen](#).



Overview of the Indonesian Pavilion, 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 2013. L – R: Astari Rashid, *Pendopo: Dancing the Wild Seas*; Albert Yonathan, *Cosmic Labyrinth: The Silent Path*, Titarubi, *The Shadow of Surrender*; surrounded by Entang Wiharso's wall, *The Indonesian: No Time to Hide*. (Not visible: Eko Nugroho, *Penghasut Badai-Badai, Instigator of Storms*)

This year for the first time the art of Indonesia is being exhibited in one of the two main venues for the biennale, the Arsenale, after the Venice Biennale Foundation officially invited Indonesia to mount a national Pavilion. Five visual artists, **Albert Yonathan Setyawan**, **Sri Astari Rasjid**, **Eko Nugroho**, **Entang Wiharso** and **Titarubi** and one musician, **Rahayu Supanggah**, combined their works around the theme of *Sakti*, or regeneration and female creative energy. This theme is developed in the curatorial essay by co curators Carla Bianpoen and Rifky Effendy.



Carla Bianpoen



Rifky Effendy

Carla had attended the biennale a number of times previously and had written for English language magazines and newspapers about the works that Indonesian artists had shown there. Carla, an independent journalist, crusades for the recognition of Indonesian women artists. She was the primary mover behind the exhibition, *Intimate Distance*, in August, 2007 at the *Galeri Nasional* and the book that accompanied it, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, written together with Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro. It is significant, therefore, that the theme of the exhibition in Venice is gendered and that two of the five artists are women, when the Indonesian art world is dominated by men. The co curator, Rifky Effendy, is a *kurator independen*, one of Indonesia's most active, and amongst his experience overseas, he is also a fellow of the New York-based Asia Cultural Council. Rifky is not attached to any one gallery or institution, which is common in Indonesia, but has mounted exhibitions for a range of organisations and initiated a number of art events over the past decade.



In Venice, left to right: Albert Yonathan Setyawan, Astari Rashid, Carla Bianpoen, Achille Bonita Oliva who was a consultant, amongst others, Rifky Effendy, Titarubi and Entang Wiharso.

Carla reported that the motivation to participate in the Venice Biennale in 2013 came from Restu Imansari Kusumaningrum, the director of *Bumi Purnati Indonesia*, an arts consultancy and events organiser.<sup>1</sup> Restu, having seen the Ukrainian pavilion in the previous Biennale, questioned why Indonesia was not mounting a similar exhibition at the Biennale. Working with *Change Performing Arts* of Milan who had been involved with the Ukrainian pavilion, she set about approaching the Indonesian government for their support. The process was a long and arduous one, convincing the government that it was important Indonesia be represented and obtaining a Letter of Interest for the Venice Biennale Foundation. The Ministry for Tourism and Creative Economy allocated money for the rent of the space in the *Arsenale* for the duration of the biennale but rent is just a small portion of the budget and funding remains a major problem.<sup>2</sup> Still, the Indonesian Pavilion this year marks the first serious involvement of government funds for an international art event.

According to the curators, it is also the first time that the theme for an exhibition in Venice has been taken from Indonesian cultural heritage. This opens complex issues surrounding the representation of a nation in an international survey exhibition. It was probably necessary to have a theme to convince the Indonesian government the pavilion represented Indonesia and provided

some connection between disparate artworks. Yet representing the nation with traditional symbols, such as the *wayang*, Buddhist stupas and *gamelan* music, is defining Indonesian culture with stereotypes that are all too familiar. Alia Swastika, reviewing the Indonesian pavilion in the *Jakarta Globe*, wrote: "Do we want to reduce Indonesian art to symbols of nostalgia rather than offering our critical perspective on our current situation as a nation and part of the international community?"<sup>3</sup>

Biennales have provoked these and similar debates. They speak an international language of art now called 'contemporary' and seem to demand experimental media and contentious content. Local identity and local concerns can be overwhelmed by the homogenising forces of contemporary art speak, so what art forms give a genuine sense of place and best convey the concerns of Indonesians? Can these concerns be expressed in the international language of contemporary art without being reduced to a tourist logo?

If we compare the work of the two women artists in the exhibition, we find one relies on the traditional arts to signal local identity and the other works entirely within the international format. Sri Astari Rasjid presents some *wayang*-like figures of *Bedoyo* dancers at the entrance to a *pendopo*, or traditional Javanese house, as symbols of **Sakti**, or female creative energy. They are decorative, ethnographic objects with no reference to contemporary concerns, although Astari has used traditional elements in the past to comment on present issues.



Foreground: Albert Yonathan Setyawan, *Cosmic Labyrinth: The Silent Path*; rear: Astari Rasjid, *Pendopo: Dancing the Wild Seas*

In their curatorial essay, the curators declare, "The challenge has been how to draw on the principles of **Sakti** while illuminating continuity in the progression of past-present and future in a contemporary artistic language". Astari's figures are no more than an illustration of **Sakti**, there is no 'progression of past-present and future', no transformation of tradition into contemporary meaning.

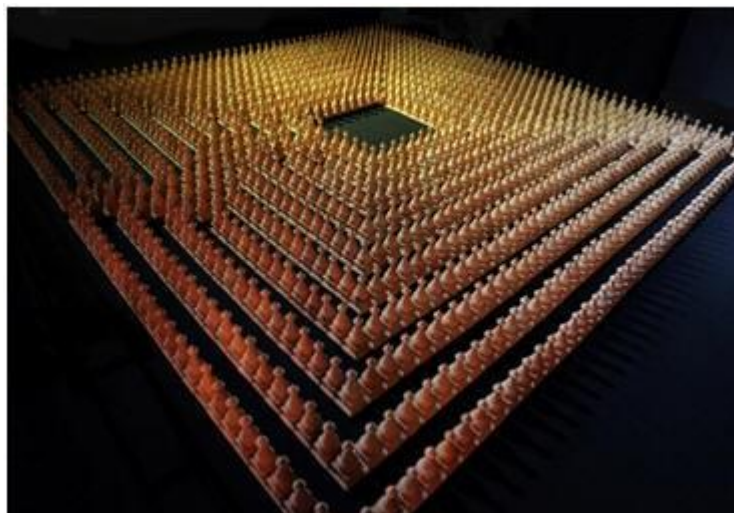


Astari Rasjid, *Pendopo: Dancing the Wild Seas*.



Titarubi, *Shadow of Surrender*

Titarubi in her *The Shadow of Surrender*, on the other hand, works entirely within the international language of art. Her installation consists of school benches made from burnt wood with overly large blank books on them. On the walls are large charcoal drawings of a burnt forest mounted in heavy gold frames that are a strange, possibly Venetian, reference. Are we to understand these drawings as grand landscapes or depictions of environmental degradation, as she declares in her artist's statement? Both the large books and the school benches are familiar art forms for international exhibitions, so much so they can be found even in this Venice Biennale. A Costa Rican artist uses a series of desks with inscriptions on them and a Brazilian artist has books in sculptural shapes. Where is the commentary on a particularly Indonesian experience here? We have to rely on the artist's intention expressed in her statement accompanying the work that her books and desks relate to Indonesian culture for this is a work entirely in the language of contemporary art speak.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, *Cosmic Labyrinth: The Silent Path*

Albert Yonathan Setyawan's *Cosmic Labyrinth: The Silent Path*, is an installation of over a thousand ceramic stupas laid out in a shape reminiscent of Borobudur. These simultaneously reference very familiar Indonesian traditional arts and very familiar international art forms of multiple objects laid out in a pattern. Albert states he was inspired by various prayer houses - the church, the mosque, and the temple - but only the stupa shape is present here.

The work is an illustration once again of the theme of **Sakti** and as such invites contemplation, but such themes are grand aims devised for committees and catalogues, not really the driving motivation for an individual artist's work. It can as a result be a struggle for an artist to meet a curatorial brief that is some vague concept designed to be all inclusive. This can be a problem for all survey shows: how are disparate forms and content to be united, can a theme be devised to give an exhibition direction and purpose?



Eko Nugroho, *Penghasut Badai-Badai (Instigator of Storms)*

Eko Nugroho's bamboo raft, *Penghasut Badai-Badai (Instigator of Storms)*, is perhaps the most transgressive work in the Indonesian pavilion. It is claimed that the figures on the raft symbolise the ability of the Indonesian people to survive amidst overwhelming political, social and religious challenges and that this is a 'feat of Sakti'. But the use of old oil barrels with fantastical figures and shapes stem more from Eko's surreal comic strips than Sakti's 'uplifting creativity'. There is a cynicism in this work that doesn't sit comfortably with the benign and spiritual theme.



Entang Wiharso, *The Indonesian: No Time to Hide*, entrance gate.



Entang Wiharso, *The Indonesian: No Time to Hide*, detail.

Of all the works, Entang Wiharso's *The Indonesian: No Time to Hide*, draws on the traditions of the past, the narrative reliefs on Hindu temples such as Prambanan in Central Java, to comment on contemporary life in Indonesia and it fulfills the claim that the art in the pavilion reinterprets tradition to have contemporary meaning. Entang's work has the scale and solemnity to be impressive: a wall of reliefs that define the exhibition space with a gateway entrance. The bronze, aluminium and graphite construction implies a metallic solidity which, apparently, the medium doesn't have, and similarly, the meaning shifts and changes. The figures refer to love, deceit, politics and history and are ambiguous, with unexpected eruptions of organic shapes and changes of scale. This is an ambitious work from a sophisticated artist comfortable with international artistic dialogue and he brings an Indonesian feel and commentary on culture to this international exhibition.

The lighting and gamelan music from Rahayu Supanggah, whose career has consisted of reinterpreting traditional music, combine to dramatically 'stage' the works for the visitor. The pavilion would hold its own amongst the many installations and national pavilions at the biennale and, in this, the curators have achieved what has clearly been the primary aim behind participation in Venice. Indonesian art can talk contemporary art speak or, as Carla Bianpoen put it, "...show that Indonesia is taking its place and of equal footing on the global map ...and it is hoped that the world will take due note."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Email, Carla Bianpoen, 29/08/2013

<sup>2</sup> Bharti Lalwani, "Indonesia at the Venice Biennale, in conversation with Carla Bianpoen and Rifky Effendy", *Culture 360 magazine*, May 6, 2013, <http://culture360.org/magazine/indonesia-at-the-venice-biennale-in-conversation-with-carla-bianpoen-and-rifky-effendy/#sthash.JDTPJatW.dpuf>

<sup>3</sup> Alia Swastika, "What is the relevance of representing a nation in current contemporary art discourse?" Piece of Mind: Crossing Borders and the Indonesian Pavilion at Venice Biennale, *Jakarta Globe*, June 27, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Deanna Ramsay, "Creating Sakti", *The Jakarta Post*, Wed. March 27, 2013, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/27/creating-sakti.html>