

## 'Reformasi Indonesia! Protest art, 1995-2000



Arahmaiani  
*Tropical Elogy, 1998, charcoal*

Nowadays many ethnographic museums found themselves needing to reconsider the display of their collections. Usually these collections were assembled during colonial times. Their purpose was to inform the Western public about the different cultures of the exotic 'Other'. Museum Nusantara in Delft has changed its display of the permanent collection of Indonesian objects, and now stresses the mutual cultural exchange between Indonesia and the Netherlands. The museum has also set itself the goal of informing visitors about recent developments in Indonesian culture.

Museum Nusantara opened an exhibition, 'Reformasi Indonesia!' on 9 June 2000; a display of 'protest art' produced by twelve Indonesian contemporary artists. Around forty works (paintings, graphics, drawings, and objects) focussing on the turbulent period of reformasi, the process of reforms in the political, social and economic field which have taken place in Indonesia between 1995 and 2000. The reformasi movement was elucidated in even more detail by illustrative posters, items of election propaganda, T-shirts, and newspaper clippings. The exhibition revealed that under a repressive regime, visual artists needed to invent their own, secret language. The twelve artists belonged to the post-Independence generation (thirty to fifty years old). They have studied international modern art developments, and wanted to claim their place in the international art world. Most of them lived and worked in big cities: Jakarta, Bandung, or Yogyakarta on

the island of Java. The selection of the works was based on the critical content and the social involvement of each individual artist.

To produce art that criticized the Soeharto regime was not without its dangers. Artists could be jailed or find themselves repressed in many ways. Therefore, Indonesian visual artists developed their own, often 'hidden' language, full of subtle symbolism. It was only after 1998 that criticism could be expressed openly.

The exhibition 'Reformasi Indonesia!' demonstrated this change: from the indirect, often complicated symbolism in 1995 to the open and active protest in 2000. The main theme of the art works remained the same: the political and cultural manipulation of the Indonesia citizen during the 32 years of the New Order government of Soeharto.

### **Wild pig**

The first part of the exhibition stressed the dominance of the Javanese culture as one of

the important sources of corruption and stagnation. A huge oil painting, *The Field of Tension between Reality and Illustration*, by Astari Rashid (1953) showed a seated aristocratic Javanese couple wearing traditional clothing. Their acquiescent attitude is in contrast to the clippings from the daily newspapers that have been attached to the canvas under the layer of paint. Dashed over the papers, red paint drips down, an allusion to the eruption of violence in 1998. Between the couple is a gorge through which flows a river. The landscape is divided in two: the left features the modern capital Jakarta, the right a traditional Javanese village. A tree of life used in the shadow theatre (wayang kulit) has been placed in a niche above the landscape. This tree refers to the end of the old era and the beginning of a new phase in Indonesian history.

A strong comment on the process of reformasi could be seen in the series of three



Djoko Pekik: *Hunting the Wild Boar, Indonesia 1998*,  
oil on canvas

huge paintings of a wild pig by Djoko Pekik (1938), the oldest participant of the exhibition. In the first work (1996), a massive black pig is seen at the forefront keeping its milk all for itself. In the

background, the skyline and the flyovers of Jakarta can be seen (symbols of the richness of Soeharto and his clan). Crowds of people are moving slowly towards the pig. In the second work, Indonesia 1998, *The Wild Pig Hunt*, the situation has changed.

The people have captured the pig and tied it to a bamboo pole. To the right, a number of dancing figures are holding a party, but further in the background some older men are surveying the situation with a critical eye: the pig is not yet dead. Finally, in the third work, *Without Flowers or Telegram of Condolence, Year 2000*, the pig has become a corpse. Birds and flies pick the flesh from the carcass. A ravaged, burned-out landscape is the legacy of the Soeharto clan. In the background the luxurious apartment buildings and motorways of Jakarta are visible. Pekik has made a statement about the escalating contrast between the rich and the poor. His paintings are a tribute to the 'small people', the Indonesian *rakyat*, who are exploited by the greed of those in power, symbolized by the wild pig.

### Empty chairs

In the second part of the exhibition, the cruel manipulation of the individual by the state was expressed by Agung Kurniawan (1968), Hanura Hosea (1966) and Tisna Sanjaya (1959). Their lugubrious drawings and graphic works show ghostlike people without eyes or ears, people who are moved as puppets by those in power. Empty chairs refer to a power vacuum situation: who will be the next president?

Some Indonesian artists joined in the student protests. Through installations in exhibitions and performances, these artists expressed their criticism of the Soeharto

regime. Indonesian 'protest art' has had some precedents: first during the colonial period, when Indonesian painters supported the struggle for Independence (1945-1950). The second was at the beginning of the 1970s when the 'New Indonesia Art Movement' (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru) was founded. This movement supported the student protests against the government which took place in that same decade. Some members, like one of the founders, Harsono, are still active.

The last part of the exhibition showed works by artists who were political activists as well. Arahmaiani (1961) and Harsono (1949) participated in the student demonstrations and observed the riots that took place in May 1998. The chaotic situation in which plundering, arson, murder, and rape were the order of the day inspired Arahmaiani to make a series of charcoal drawings with the title *Tropical Elegy*. Dark silhouettes watch passively while their house burns. A woman is threatened with a knife. In *New Order Wayang*, dead bodies are impaled on a bamboo stake. The tree of life, used to signal the beginning and the end of a Wayang performance, has been placed in the middle. Above the tree, a seated figure with a necktie is in power. A tank is aiming its guns at the performance.

The aggression and violence used by the army and the police during May 1998 have been portrayed by Harsono in his series *Republik Indochoaos*. Based on the enlarged form of a hundred rupiah postage stamp, these etchings are a documentation of 13 and

14 May 1998. Combining photographs, texts and etching Harsono demonstrated a harsh reality: burning bodies, the army shooting, and the police with clubs beating up demonstrators. A portrait of Soeharto bears a diagonal stamp with the text 'expired'.

### New doors

The difficult position of the Chinese (Christian) minority in a country in which the majority of the people is Muslim has been touched on in *The Kingdom Come*. In the work, a screaming Chinese woman is making the sign of the Cross to protect herself from evil. Harsono worked together with Roman Catholic priests in Jakarta trying to help the victims of racism and religious discrimination.

The purpose of the exhibition 'Reformasi Indonesia!' was to demonstrate that contemporary Indonesian artists were touching upon new subjects. Like the Russian *Glasnost*, the Indonesian process of *Reformasi* has opened new doors. Shocked by the growing violence in Indonesian society, these twelve artists have expressed their concern about the future of Indonesia. They have examined the psychology of the country and its inhabitants. This open search into corruption, power and responsibility is new for a country where artists were not free to criticize the government. This protest art has to be seen as a stepping stone towards democracy in Indonesia.

**By Helena Spanjaard, IIAS Newsletter number 23**



Agung Kurniawan:  
*Morfological study, 1996, charcoal.*

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supplementary reading following a visit. It is also of interest to the arm-chair traveller unable to venture as far afield as Cambodia.

The author has a PhD in art history and has written several books on Southeast Asian art and culture, including *Angkor. An Introduction to the Temples* (1994).

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