

# Curating for a National Gallery Indonesia

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During the period between 1999-2001, I was part of the curatorial team of Indonesian National Gallery (ING). There were nine people in the team, comprising four art critics, one governmental representative, two artists, one graphic designer, and myself, an art historian. We began work several months after the fall of the New-Order Government, during a time when the Indonesian economy and political situation had deteriorated. We gained memorable experiences as curators organising exhibitions at the ING at that time. ING's main goals in holding exhibitions include the top priority of educating the public, providing information to visitors, and encouraging thought and discussion. Due to lack of funding and difficulties, the team was inclined to see itself not as a facilitator of learning but as a producer of knowledge.

To exhibit artworks, an artist or a group of artists was required to send a letter of application to the head of ING. We had to evaluate many letters at the beginning of every year before exhibitions for the following twelve months could be scheduled. During my involvement in the team, the exhibitions have been more object-oriented than concept-oriented. In an object-oriented exhibition, collections were central, while educational information was limited and implied meanings were not examined. The curator focuses on a direct aesthetic or a classification approach to presentation (Dean, 1994: 4). In such exhibitions, the emotional impact of the object is more important than the story

behind it. It was not surprising that during every brainstorming session of the evaluation phase, all members of the team were inclined to comment on the physical phenomena of the works rather than on how the team had to find the best way to educate people, provide information to visitors, and encourage visitors to interpret the meanings of the works.



*I Gusti Ketut Suandi  
"Legong Keraton Dance"*

There were three basic types of gallery visitors. First, there were people who spent very little time closely examining the works or the content. Second, there were those who showed a genuine interest in the gallery experience and the

collections. However, they ordinarily did not spend much time reading the information in the catalogues and labels. The works on display were their main focus of attention. Third, there were those - a minority - who were able to understand the presented materials no matter how technical they were. They spent abundance of time in the gallery's buildings, reading the information in the catalogues and labels, and closely examining the work exhibited. Among those people in the third group, painting collectors were frequent visitors to the ING. Unfortunately, most of them bought the works not for collection's sake but for resale. The price of contemporary paintings in Indonesia kept soaring, and many collectors had turned themselves into art businessmen. One or two wealthy collectors even had developed their own artistic taste that somehow exerted profound influence

With the lack of funding and the continuing government intervention, it was impossible for the curatorial team to realise the ING's main goal of educating people, providing information to visitors, and encouraging visitors to be discerning. Indeed, the curators had produced knowledge, but it was very limited and this

was why frequent visitors to the gallery were more or less the same persons, mostly the collectors/businessmen.

We are still far from being able to establish the ING as a prominent gallery, let alone an ideal one. We are lucky that there is no essential distinction in identity between a museum or that of a gallery (Cannon-Brooks, 984:116): we can still call the ING a gallery, regardless of how limited the knowledge

it produces, how uninvolved the visitors.

Since the ING had been placed under the control of the central government, every decision made by the team was in harmony with the government's policies on art and culture (we have a governmental representative participating in the team). The central government, therefore, was involved, and their participation sometimes meant that the team felt compelled to act in favour of influential figures in the central government. It had something to do with the third president of the republic of Indonesia. Sometime in his presidency, through his representative, he sent a letter of application to exhibit photographs at ING. These were photographs he had made in the later years of his life, in the ING. An artist was eligible to exhibit his works in the main building of the ING as long as he was able to show his excellent records for years, as an artist. The President did not qualify for this, but he had the power to realise his idea. Although, today, many artists consider that access to the ING is limited,



Lucia Hartini  
"Night Landscape"



Effendi  
"Mother and Child"

on many young artists in Indonesia. The commercial activities of the collectors have been carried out for a relatively long time, and information access to the public was closed. This was, I think, one of the contributing factors that had caused the widening gap of understanding and appreciation between the curators and the public/visitors.

sometimes something occurs out of the normal procedure. The President's case is not the only example. An international children-art exhibition was staged in the gallery, but to reach a consensus at the evaluation phase among the curators on the schedule of the exhibition was difficult. More than half of the curators rejected the idea of exhibiting the works in the main building, regardless of the international orientation of the exhibition, on the grounds that the artists involved were children whose artistic records were still questionable. Under influence of the central government, the exhibition was finally staged in the main building.

By the end of 2000, a sensational scandal related to art exhibitions erupted in Indonesia, and was widely covered by the national news media. The programme committee of the exhibition, entitled 'The Old Painting Exhibitions, Pre-World War II', intended to display and sell art works in the exhibition by auction. This event was to be held at Jakarta's Regent Hotel. The committee sent a letter to the ING's chief asking for her endorsement. After the assessment, the ING's chief and the curators rejected the request on the grounds that most of the works in the exhibition - among others said to be by European masters such as Van Gogh, Picasso, Chagall, and Dufy - were considered to have been falsified. Somehow the committee stuck to its programme, and managed to persuade a high-ranked government official to give an opening speech. Unfortunately, he fulfilled this request, disappointing the ING's chief and curators. This time, the curatorial team was not in agreement with the government's policy (the official later apologised to the team for his involvement). Somehow, the committee was also successful in persuading the Indonesian Fourth President's wife to open the ceremony. Fortunately, she withdrew her endorsement and did not even come to the exhibition. She realised that she had been deceived.

There was awareness among curators that the use of publicity to attract public attention was essential. Often, however, our budgets prevented us from using publicity effectively. What we could only do was to produce posters, announcements of the openings, catalogues, and labels. These were all done by the curators, produced in what Hooper-Greenhill has called "the private space of the curators" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992:200).

We were fortunate that the media helped promote the ING's exhibitions. Some important newspapers and magazines in Jakarta have routinely included a one-page statement and representative photographs of works from the exhibitions. Nevertheless, the division between the "private space of the curators" and the public space of the visitors still remains.

**Reference:**

David Dean, *Museum Exhibition*, Routledge, London 1996.  
 Eileen Hooper-Greenhil, *Museum and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 1992.  
 P. Cannon-Brooks, "The Nature of Museum Collections," in J. Thompson (ed.), *Manual of Curatorship*, Butterworth, London, 1984.



Jeihan S.  
 "Flower and Girl"



Sarnadi Adam  
 "The Coconut Harvest"

