



PROJECT MUSE®

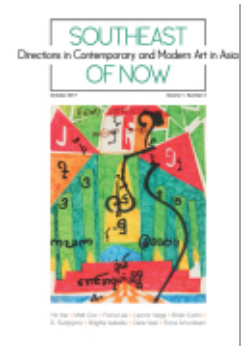
"We Know Where We Will Be Taking Indonesian Art", 1948

Sindudarsono Sudjojono, Brigitta Isabella

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, Volume 1, Number 2, October 2017, pp. 159-164 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2017.0017>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/673254>

S. Sudjojono, “We Know Where We Will Be Taking Indonesian Art”, 1948

Translation by Brigitta Isabella

The text was first published in Revolusioner magazine and later republished as Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa, Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, Yogyakarta, 1946

As Indonesians, we admit that the art we make here nowadays has a western style. Nevertheless, to say that it is not an Indonesian style is not accurate. First, long before Raden Saleh, we had a history of painting. Even though this was not similar to how we paint today, this was because our painting correlated with our way of life and worldview at that time. Second, even if we briefly renounce the old way, it does not mean we only follow or copy. It is because we *believe* the truth in the theories of Da Vinci, Dürer, Cézanne and others.

Realism does not belong only to the West. Realism belongs to all of us, to every human being. It is not about being incidentally born as westerners like Da Vinci, Dürer or Cézanne. Any child of God, whether he is in Bethlehem (Christ), in Mecca (Muhammad), in China (Lao Tzu, Confucius, Li Tai Po) or in India (Buddha), in Egypt (Echnaton), in the United States (Louis Armstrong, a Negro) or in Europe (Socrates, Berlage, Cézanne), is not entitled to contain and monopolise his theory if it contains truth and is beneficial to the world.

A Dutch writer said in *Uitzicht Magazine*, “Undoubtedly, without Kokoschka, Klee, Munch, Chagall et al., it would be impossible for us to see the kinds of paintings as seen in both exhibitions in Java.”

They still assume that Indonesian people would not be able to embody impressionist painting, realism, expressionism, cubism or surrealism if people

[**Southeast of Now**
Vol. 1 No. 2 (October 2017), pp. 159–64]

like Kokoschka, Klee, Munch, Chagall, Utrillo and others did not exist. We could build Borobudur, which, if it is compared to *Hunpe bedden* or *de Amsterdamse Beurs*, would be akin to comparing a prophet and a *heiden*. Thus, it is not an exaggeration if we say, "If Europe and the Netherlands are completely destroyed it will be us who will continue the civilisation and the art of the world." Asians should not be too proud because Muhammad, Christ, Buddha, Einstein and Marx were eastern people. On the other hand, western people should not be arrogant if we use their art theories. As we analyse and observe carefully, Europeans must remember that they never had the art of painting before. The oldest art of painting in the world is not from Europe, but Egypt. Also, Europeans should not feel superior that they have Pythagoras, a mathematician who learned from Egyptian professors before he became a master and opened his own academy. In addition, the Dutch do not need to be conceited and claim that the Theosophical Society is Mrs Blavatsky's idea, thus it is a westerner's idea. Leadbeater concedes that they were actually inspired by an ascetic from the East. Greek art, which is glorified as majestic western art, is not sterile from eastern influence. It was only within 100 years that Greece can escape from non-Greek influence.

Uitzicht also said, "Typically, Easterners tend to make technical skills their greatest concern."

The writer might be able to see, but clearly he cannot understand what exactly art is and what the art of painting is. Theories can be read, but understanding art is more difficult. It requires the knowledge of *brush strokes*. Hence, understanding *brush strokes* needs practice and experience. Still, practice is not enough, for one should possess an active and genuinely delicate sense, which is formed over time. When I read a writer's sentences, they show that he only utilises his knowledge as a *measurement tool*.

No artist could honestly say that the use of "not-so-Eastern" techniques such as perspective or anatomy, impressionism, cubism or surrealism would prevent eastern content from emerging. The "eastern" sense in a painting lies not only in the techniques used but, more significantly, in its subject matter and its artistic soul.

Uitzicht said, "It is such a shame to see many sources were ignored when Impressionism started in Europe..." What a pity! This westerner clearly does not understand why Impressionism was born. It seems that he is only familiar with Angelo, David, Zuloaga, de László and Sargent.

Impressionism was born not because of Constable, Jongkind, Manet and other impressionist painters. This is not to put aside their roles in the establishment of impressionism. But it was born as a consequence of the birth of a new ideology, one that needed to be born and to strike away Europeans' obsolete

and incorrect way of thinking and way of life. Our European colleagues, whom by chance were born and lived on a continent to the west of the Bosphorus in the beginning of the 19th century, used to hum the slogan: "Be gone beauty and...deformation." It is not because they do not understand *beauty* or technique, but it is compelled by a *calculation*, an act of eradicating materialism and the egoistic way of life, in favour of a simple yet straight life, as well as to care for others. People should stop loving a man like David, in terms of his character and art, for David and his friends are symbolic of an egoistic and materialistic community.

The writer should not complain about the decline of painting since Johan Jongkind, Manet, Cézanne and Picasso emerged. In fact, he should be gladdened by the arrival of a new genre, as it indicates a new start, and the beginning of a more proper art.

Of *Uitzicht's* writer, I ask the following questions:

1. Could expressionism have been born without impressionism?
2. Could Paul Klee, Kandinsky and Picasso have realised their painting philosophies consciously, if impressionism never become a belief and received any *recognition*?

I know the writer cannot answer those questions, but if he did, it would be as if he were defending something impossible, like a woman who could *still* remain a virgin even after giving birth.

Let us see another explanation.

Would Picasso be blamed for his path, for he could walk and talk freely, leaving his chamber, wandering around until he got lost in "hell"? Do people recognise that only by walking this path could he be transformed from a wooden toy into a speaking creature? This "leap" is seen as a deviation. Yet, people do not know that this deviation had taken him to hell before he was led to the eternal heaven, and then resurrected from "dead" material to a conscious and reflexive being who believes in God.

The writer disagrees with Vincent being baptised as *a culture saint*. We also think it is improper to praise him and position him as a god of the cultural journey without any further thought. We are not an uncivilised society, and we are not so stupid as to say that all of his paintings were extraordinary, even though he was Vincent. Besides, we do not want to imitate him, him who suffered from syphilis and depression, just because he was the founder of expressionism. It is better for us to befriend Vincent, who was courageous enough to sacrifice his body and soul for a great aspiration, instead of being like this *Uitzicht's* writer who stupidly said, "It is rare for a man to have a

flaming heart [like Vincent].” Is he brave enough to say that Christ does not have a *flaming heart*? Is he brave enough to say that the Buddha too does not have a *flaming heart*? How about Muhammad? Ramakrishna? Lao Tzu? Li Tai Po? Gandhi? *Wali Songo*? Don’t they all have a flaming heart? None of these people are westerners. *Wali Songo* is not Dutch, *meneer*!

A few lines later he said, “What the western artists have had over the eastern civilisation from the beginning is their proficiency in the mastery of complex forms, which makes these cultures culminate to their peak.”

Has the writer seen any old Chinese paintings?

What do you think about these works, Sir? Don’t you see that they have produced such detailed and intricate works? They may be even more powerful than Permeke or Kokoschka. And from this point, we learn that impressionism was not born in Europe but in China, in the East. Yes. You might argue that this might be true but that it was unconsciously done. Good! Did Vincent consciously mention that his work should be recognised as an expressive work? No. But you, the Dutch, still consider that he was the one who started it, not the Germans nor the French.

At the end of his essay, the writer proposed two possibilities: first: An art that is led by the aristocracy. Second: The art of *gemeenschap* [collectivity] (communism).

However, it is evident that the writer is more inclined towards art that is favoured by the aristocracy. He said that if the aristocrats do not play a strong role [in cultural leadership] “true civilisation will die a slow death and art will wither into a new form of pragmatism or move in other directions”. This Dutch writer might be denying the truth of the scientific Marxist theory. Lenin, as a number one communist and Marxist, once said to his communist comrades, “We have not yet achieved our objective. What we have achieved now in Russia is only a phase that we must undergo.” What Lenin wanted to convey is that it is not enough for people to only be able to read, write, or ride a tank or a car. Communism as an ideology is also made up of moral, spiritual and artistic solutions. Communism does not reside solely in the material realm. It moves towards a realm of plasticity that exceeds our three-dimensionality.

The proof: Russia leads the world of cinema with their movies, as well as in literature with young poets who are not as shallow as da Costa.

On Shakespeare’s 350th anniversary in Russia, 800 theatres performed Shakespeare’s plays for weeks. Radios, magazines and newspapers simultaneously published news to respect and learn about this great man. On the contrary, there was only a *regular notification ad* about this event in London. Moreover, the people of Moscow today demonstrate great understanding of and respect for Renoir’s paintings.

Communism is always against the aristocracy, whether in politics, economics, society, or the arts. Yet in his essay, this Dutch writer seemed to be praising the aristocracy, and he views communism with some hesitancy.

Why?

Beware my comrades in the Communist Party of Holland!

One of the reasons why he bears with communism is because he is a coward.

He does not dare to decisively choose a party. If tomorrow the Communist Party wins, he will use his sentences as evidence and say, "See, I told you so!"

We have been acquainted with several types of governance recently, so we know what kind of person this man is.

Now let us return to our subject. I apologise for digressing. We admit that new movement in the art world indeed creates the possibility for people to cause an unintended excessiveness. Is there any -ism or even religion that is not excessive? Every -ism and religion has its excesses, or will do so sooner or later.

There is nothing wrong with this movement.

But where is the problem of European painting, such that it has to undergo a constant change and frequently decline? It is getting on top by the goodwill of Cézanne et al., but it turns out to be a source of pleasure for those who work without dedication, just to satisfy their ego and to be out of "God's sight".

The first mistake in Europe lies in its lack of moral education, both in general terms and amongst those in the arts. Huizinga, the author of *In de schaduwen van morgen* [In the Shadows of Tomorrow] admits this. That is why we are not surprised if the efforts of European geniuses always fall through. The freedom that they propounded in the democratic age has decayed into an egocentric freedom. Independence and the love of truth hailed by Cézanne et al. have transformed into a negative independence and have become: "I want to be different than others." Due to a lack of knowledge, individuals' freedom has separated them from society.

This is not just a European problem. It is the problem of how our society is structured on the whole. It is an *international problem* indeed.

About the future of Indonesian art, we as Indonesians are quite capable of deciding for ourselves. Since the Dutch colonial era, in the era of PERSAGI [Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia, the Indonesian Picture-makers' Association], we already know where we will be taking our Indonesian art. If the Dutch writer in *Uitzicht* wishes to interfere with this matter, we do not need them to meddle in our affairs. They have never really proven to be competent in this matter for the past 350 years.

We will not blame our European colleagues for their mistakes. We will honour them, for they have worked sincerely, even sacrificing their lives for a great aspiration. We will use their works as a landmark, like a shipwreck in the ocean, of our people's struggle in this world and in our revolution in Indonesia, not only to enable artists to become artistic, but also to make the whole society become artistic, to become artistically conscious as Indonesia was before [in the past].

We will accomplish our revolution not only through the intellect but also through artistic means.

BIOGRAPHY

Brigitta Isabella graduated from the Department of Philosophy, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta in 2012 and continued her studies in critical methodology at King's College, London. Since 2011, she has taken part in a research collective based in Yogyakarta called KUNCI Cultural Studies Center. The collective, established in 1999, has been deeply preoccupied with critical knowledge production and sharing through means of media publication, cross-disciplinary encounters, research-action, artistic interventions and vernacular education within and across community spaces.

Sindudarsono Sudjojono (Kisaran, Sumatera, Indonesia, 1913–86) was an Indonesian artist, writer and activist, and is widely regarded as formative in the development of discourses of modernity in Indonesia. He was active in Jakarta's Keimin Bunka Shidoso, a Japanese-sponsored cultural centre during the Japanese occupation in Indonesia. Later, he was one of the founders of PERSAGI (Association of Indonesia Drawing Specialists, 1938) and SIM (Young Indonesian Artists, 1946). *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Lukis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa* was written as a response to Dutch art critic, J. Hopman, who commented that an Indonesian art had yet to emerge.