**Passion / Possession**

**Contemporary Art from the Eyes of Indonesian Collectors**

This collection-based exhibition is a platform that may help us understand how art objects are consumed in a particular context, namely Indonesia. Different from a general understanding of “art reception”, art collecting is an activity that presupposes an exchange of symbolic and economic capitals through the transfer of ownership of a particular object. Studies on the collecting activity in Indonesia is essential to see how the patronage system works in the country, and further, give impact to the wider art ecosystem. By giving an emphasis on the reception or consumption of art in Indonesia, this exhibition intends to place artworks as a mere node that triggers various interactions in the art world. Artists, in this stance, are not the central subject in the discourse. The existence of art objects today is not only determined by the process of creation, but also by how they are mediated and collected.

When contemporary art collecting has been a prevalent trend in many other parts of the world, can we still find its particularity in Indonesia? How are we to map the practice of art collecting in wider fields of economics, politics and culture in Indonesia? How important is the artworks’ “national category” in the current art world? What is the role of Indonesian art collectors in the process of validating the value of Indonesian art in international market? This essay, as an introduction to the exhibition project, should be read as merely an attempt to answer some of these big queries, and pave one of the doorways to further and in-depth researches about Indonesian art world.

This exhibition displays works that exist in the collections of ten Indonesian private collectors — none of whom represents any state or national institution. The spectrum selected for this exhibition represents works that were collected in the last decade. While most of these collectors enthusiastically acquire works by Indonesian artists, some are also extensively collecting international contemporary art. Painting is still presented the most-collected medium; many of the collections, however, actually include much more complicated and large-scale works. Due to a number of limitations, this exhibition cannot display the most gigantic and the most spectacular, yet overall it still represent a body of collection that the collectors themselves consider very important. According to their starting points, these collectors can be roughly divided into at three different generations: 1980s, 1990s, 2000s.

**Contemporary Art in the Expanded Market**

Can we identify the artworks in this exhibition into a particular classification? Yes, indeed. But the challenge comes from the term “contemporary art”, which tends to be slippery and evasive. Contemporary art is definitely not a style, neither a coherent and solid aesthetic tendency as opposed to many “-isms” in the history of art. In this exhibition, I define contemporary art simply as art made at the “present”. To avoid the problem of semantics, the spectrum of works that I present is not constrained by any artistic concepts or approaches. The diversity of media found in the exhibition is an effort to portray the openness and pluralism embraced by contemporary art collectors these days.

With the inclusiveness as such, it is hence difficult to answer when contemporary art began to be collected by Indonesian collectors. This exhibition, however, is not simply disregard the distinction between “contemporary” and “modern”. Since the early 1990s, the term contemporary art has actually emerged as a buzzword in Indonesia. It was used by some writers and curators to refer to a variety of tendencies that differed from modernism. Along with the rise of regional exhibitions in the Asia-Pacific region, contemporary art became a popular term to identify the recent works of young Indonesian artists in the 1990s.

Due to the dominant curatorial framework formulated by a number of international events throughout the 1990s, the category of “contemporary” in Indonesia did tend to be associated merely with installation, performance art, video, photography and other “non-painting” works. Furthermore, the term “contemporary” was exclusively attached to some works with critical contents, especially socio-political critiques. In light of the dynamics within local art practices, along with their sociological dimensions, I see the symptom as important turn to the understanding of the term “contemporary art” in Indonesia.

It has to be noted that the works of “contemporary art” in above definition were not part of the mainstream market in Indonesia.[[1]](#footnote-1) Until the early 2000s, contemporary art with sociopolitical content was only shown in some alternative spaces and did not get a place in the majority of commercial galleries (even though some museums in Japan and Australia had commissioned and purchased them in the early 1990s). Some young artists who already had recognition in international events were not well known in their own country. Until the late 1990s, the majority of Indonesian collectors were still fond of the works of senior and established painters.

The shift in trends of art collecting in Indonesia was only more noticeable in the early 2000s, with the increasing popularity of “contemporary art” in the market, particularly through international auction houses. The emergence of China as a new economic force in Asia, followed by the popularity of Chinese contemporary art both in the Indonesian primary and secondary markets, triggered the increasing interest in young Indonesian contemporary artist. The link between Chinese and Indonesia art market booms is quite clear in the case of many Indonesian collectors, who started collecting by acquiring Chinese contemporary paintings, then eventually turning to the works of young Indonesian artists.

International auction houses have already auctioned the works of Indonesian masters since the midst 1990s. But the increasing number of works by young or living Indonesian artists consigned to different auction houses was a phenomenon that just emerged in the early 2000s. Marked by the bubbling price of Indonesian art works in both primary and secondary markets, the market boom of Indonesian art is said to have reached its peak during 2007 - 2008, with the increasing frequency of commercial gallery shows and sales, as well as auction price record outbreaks, including for works of young Indonesian artists — most of whom were born in the 1970s and 1980s — under the label “contemporary”.

The contemporary art boom of the 2000s was a major factor that shaped the current world of collecting in Indonesia. Not only did it encourage the birth of new private collectors, but also expanded the variety of art collection. Today, although the market in is admittedly still dominated by painting, other media such as installation, video, sound and photography works have also become more and more collectible for Indonesian collectors. It is a new development, considering such works used to be inferior in the local market and was absent in many private collections of the 1990s.

The 2000s decade saw how the Indonesian art world experienced a greater expansion through international commercial networks. As contemporary art collecting became a more prevalent lifestyle, collectors participated more actively in the global traffic of art works. Media technology, the system of free trade and global human mobility have made the art market much more open to cross-national / trans-national collecting. The rise of the international art fairs in Asia since the midst of 2000s has been successful in building a new regional crowd and fostering exchange among diverse art professionals.

Contemporary art is global art, as put critically by Hans Belting.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the characteristics of contemporary global art is its disruption of the reference and patronage of Euro-American art history. The diversity of contemporary art practice these days is the logic consequence of the situation as such. Looking at the Indonesian case, as this exhibition attempts to show, I would like to elaborate Belting’s thesis by proposing that the post-historical notion of “the contemporary” and the current global art market system have to go hand-in-hand in shaping the free-flowing and ever-increasing expansion of distribution and consumption of art.

**Collecting and Beyond**

Although the global art world situation has played a role in shaping the model of art collecting in Indonesia, the activities of Indonesian collectors have also been inseparable from the local and societal contexts where he or she belongs. One of the most striking traits in the formation of Indonesian art world is how it relies on the country’s private sector, and has exhibited little dependence on the support of government funds. Hence, the culture of art collecting in Indonesia is also inseparable from the phenomena of art market booms.

Although it has started since the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, built his collection throughout 1940s - 1960s, a number of historians agreed that the expansion of art collecting happened when the Indonesian art market boom began in the 1980s. When the New Order Government boosted the economic growth, new middle and upper classes emerged especially in urban areas such as Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya and Bali. The growth of luxurious hotels, corporate offices and private residences was the main factor that increased the demand for artworks. The boom also encouraged the birth of a generation of collectors who began their collection with works by modern Indonesian artists — many of whom are associated with Sukarno’s collection. Supported by the growth of commercial galleries in major cities, it can be said that most of the transactions in this period happened in the primary market.

If the first art boom was driven by the country’s economic growth, the “second art market boom” in Indonesia occurred in the late 1990s, just when the economic crisis hit Indonesia.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although it was not as strong and evident as the one that occurred in the 1980s, the second boom was more driven by secondary market activity that built the image of artworks as an investment object. As a consequence of the greater economic downfall in Asia, many foreign investors pulled out their dollars from the Indonesian domestic market. It led to a liquidity crisis, and eventually the plummeting value of the U.S. Dollar. While other investment endured a devaluation, art was perceived as relatively safe due the activity of some international auction houses auctioning works of Indonesian masters in U.S. Dollars.

In 1990, the late, noted Indonesian art critic Sanento Yuliman has written critically on the negative impacts of the market boom on private art collecting in Indonesia. He identified some symptoms of decline in the Indonesian art world.[[4]](#footnote-4) The first symptom that he described is “isolation” (*pendusunan*), the typical situation in which the Indonesian art world was experiencing a boom that is detached from the international, cosmopolitan or metropolitan atmosphere. Indonesian collectors seemed to be preoccupied with, self-absorbed in and self-celebrating the boom without noticing what was happening outside Indonesia. The market was very localized, self-centered and devoid of any international or even regional benchmarks.

He also recognized another symptom called “seclusion” (*pemingitan*)—to identify a situation in which a public collection is far from developed or even existing. Not only was he referring to the absence of a state and government art collection, but also to the fact that private collecting has rendered important paintings by Indonesian maestros invisible from public view. In his essay, Yuliman even poses a bold question on why the topic of public collections never even appeared in the history of Indonesian art. Following the art boom, works of art tended to go into seclusion because they were only consumed by limited number of the rich. He was certain that, “[…] the higher the price of the painting, the more stringent and narrow the selection (to anyone who may have the paintings), the more hidden and secluded the art work will be from the public.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, Yuliman’s criticism was based on the observation he made on the Indonesian art world of his time. Although the patterns of art patronage in Indonesia have not changed up to now due to the persistent lack of government support, the art market boom and art collecting in the 21st century have actually shifted from what he described more than twenty years ago. Indonesian art collectors, especially those involved in this exhibition, are now more conscious of the importance of cosmopolitanism and international art arena. Quite often they go together to attend exhibition openings, auctions, art fairs and biennales internationally. Some of them even have founded spaces or museums that are open to public. The pattern of the collectors’ activities has changed along with their integration with a broader art world.

In the early 2000s, the activity of a number of Indonesian collectors has been known through their involvement as patrons of exhibitions. Some of the senior collectors also do not hesitate to finance the publication of books on their collections and have enlisted critics, historians or curators to contribute. Their activities also expanded and are no longer limited to inaugurating exhibition openings or writing a simple introduction to local exhibition catalogues. As the volume of contemporary art collecting increases rapidly, Indonesian collectors are becoming the main actors of the stage. Their existence even becomes more apparent in the regional and international forums. Younger generations of collectors have built their own circle. Periodically, they meet fellow collectors, or hold series of discussions with artists, critics and curators. Some Indonesian collectors have even curated exhibitions of Indonesian artists.

I argue that changes in the situation in Indonesia in the mid 2000s have also prompted changes in previously fixed and stable positions of art world actors, including collectors. At the extreme, the practice of collecting is no longer tied to market mechanisms alone. As the interaction between the collector and other actors increase, expand and intensify remarkably, new patterns of interfacing or cooperation have emerged, in such a way that collectors may fulfill multi-faceted objectives and agencies. They may even play a variety of roles all at once. In this kind of mechanism, collecting is becomes the transformation of economic capital into other symbolic capitals (cultural, social and even political). This is how this exhibition wishes to discuss the art world: as a collective entity that is built upon a variety of interest and operates its principles to secure and maintain the continuous values ​​of art in society.

Agung Hujatnikajennong

Exhibition Curator

1. Jim Supangkat, *In Search of Politically Correct Works of Art,* catalogue of the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1999, p. 122. For discussion on ‘contemporary as post-avant-garde art’ in Indonesia, see Agung Hujatnika, *The Contemporary Turn, Indonesian Contemporary Art of the 1980s’,* Iola Lenzi (ed.) *Negotiating Home, History and Nation, Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia,* Singapore Art Museum, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hans Belting, *Contemporary Art as Global Art,* in Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.): *The Global Art World*, Ostfildern, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There has not been much written evidence on ‘the second boom’ of the 1990s. However, based on my interview with Dr. Oei Hong Djien (February 2014), there were Indonesian collectors who enjoyed the art boom amidst the economic crisis. Sanento Yuliman, *Boom Seni Lukis, Ke Mana Seni Lukis Kita* (The Painting Boom, Quo Vadis Indonesian Painting) in Hasan, Asikin (ed.) *Dua Seni Rupa: Sepilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman*, Kalam Foundation, Jakarta, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)