**Tetap Terang: Female Voices and Indonesia’s (Expanded) Art World**

In Indonesia the month of April is a time to honor Raden Adjeng Kartini, a prominent national heroine from Java. Born on April 21, 1879 into an aristocratic family, Kartini is recognized for her resistance to the social norms of the 19th century that restricted the possibilities afforded to women. A champion of education for girls, Kartini’s legacy lives on, in part, thanks to a collection of letters first published in 1911, titled *Door Duisternis tot Licht* or *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Out of Darkness into Light), from which this exhibition of six female artists takes its title.

Known in English as *Letters of a Javanese Princess*,this collection documents Kartini’s communication with close female friends in the Netherlands via letters that express her ideals regarding personal development, education, and self-confidence as well as humanitarianism and nationalism. Yet, while Kartini has since the late-colonial era been positioned as a symbol, inseparable from the role of women in the advancement of what would become the Indonesian state, this position has not come without critique. For most obviously, besides Kartini, myriad other women have contributed to Indonesia’s historical past and contemporary development. With this in mind, the opportunity to consider what Kartini’s legacy means—in the context of 2018, declared by many as the “year of the woman”—is both noteworthy and exciting.

Ibu Kartini: A Contested Identity

Looking briefly at the historical trajectory of Kartini’s “image,” it is relevant to consider Kartini’s rebranding as *Ibu* or Mother Kartini under the New Order regime. Popularized by the obligatory national song (*lagu wajib*), “Ibu Kita Kartini,” taught to schoolchildren across the archipelago, Kartini was made into a symbol of what is referred to as “State Ibuism.” This term, attributed to feminist journalist Julia Suryakusuma, refers to the social construction of womanhood in New Order Indonesia by which women were defined as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as remembers of Indonesian society—in that order. The first stanza of “Ibu Kita Kartini” reads:

*Ibu Kita Kartini –* (Our mother Kartini)

*Putri Sejati –* (A true princess)

*Putri Indonesia –* (A princess of Indonesia)

*Harum namanya* – (Fragrant is her name)

A vivid portrayal of an aristocratic Javanese woman—polite, calm, well-mannered, not causing any trouble—under the New Order Kartini, as the nation’s eminent heroine, a princess, was made the standard of an ideal woman. An ideal that stands in contrast to figures like Cut Nyak Meutia or Cut Nyak Dien, both Acehnese revolutionary heroes who led military troops against the Dutch. Such figures, who died in battle and exile rather than childbirth, signify the ability of women to act beyond the domestic sphere, characterized by traits like aggression and violence that were not of service to the state for either Sukarno, who first declared Kartini Day in 1964 or Suharto’s New Order that promoted Kartini’s position as the mother of the nation.

At first glance these facts might appear as a challenge to Kartini’s place within the nation. However, they are not meant to suggest that Kartini’s legacy has been over glorified nor that her position of honor within the nation’s history should be overturned. On the contrary. It is thanks to Kartini, through the celebration of Kartini Day, that each year we are given the opportunity to question, challenge, and reassert what Kartini and her legacy mean to the expression of women’s voices in Indonesia that are not emerging from the dark (habis gelap, terbitlah terang) but instead, and much better viewed as, “tetap terang” or always bright, a constant source of light.

In the realm of Indonesian visual arts women’s voices have for decades been relatively marginalized. A situation that arguably is not unique to Indonesia. This is in part due to the fact that many women, upon graduation from art school cease their practice as artists in order to fulfill, much like Kartini, the demands of family and society—marriage, children, taking care of a home. In spite of this stereotypical image regarding the fate of female artists, since the first decades of Indonesia’s independent modern art history, women like Emiria Sunassa (1891 – 1964) have been present, working alongside their male compatriots. Understood by many to be one of the first female artists of note active in what was then the Dutch East Indies, Emiria was a member of PERSAGI (*Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia*) or the Association of Indonesian Drawing Specialists, an organization more commonly associated with the likes of S.Sudjojono and Agus Djaya. As this exhibition, “Tetap Terang,” demonstrates, the contribution of female artists in Indonesia’s art world has and continues to add vibrancy to what is an ever-expanding art world, illuminated by the experiences of each artist part of this exhibition.

Expanded Worlds: Indonesian Contemporary Art

The map of Indonesian visual art has, since the time of PERSAGI focused on a handful of “art centers” including Yogyakarta, Bandung, Jakarta, and Bali. The dominance of these sites has been due to the presence of institutions like the Indonesian Institute of Art or ISI (*Institut Seni Indonesia*) in Yogyakarta and the Faculty of Fine Art and Design at ITB (*Institut Teknologi Bandung*). Historically, association with one of these institutions contributed to the legitimation of an artist as part of a particular “school” and subsequently, the networks that one was a part of. Today, while these localized art worlds and their associated institutions remain important, they are no longer defining barometers of an artist’s position within what I refer to as Indonesia’s expanded art world. That is, an art world that is increasingly impacted by the forces of globalization and the experience of artists like Arahmaiani, Sally Smart, Sinta Tantra, Natisa Jones, Ines Katamso, and Natasha Lubis.

For an exhibition in honor of Kartini, the quintessential Javanese woman, one might imagine names like Kartika Affandi to be present instead of Australian artist Sally Smart or British artist of Balinese descent Sinta Tantra. By including a diversity of voices representing multiple generations and global trajectories, this exhibition reveals unique paths of communication both abstract and concrete—between personal identities (related to gender, ethnicity, and/or national identification) as well as physical spaces (like educational institutions, cities where one practices, and/or countries where one lives)—that call to mind Kartini’s correspondence via letter to friends who while physically an ocean apart, remained for Kartini close in mind and spirit.

Snapshots: Fluid Identities, Mobile Bodies

As is generally the case with group exhibitions, there is at least a single characteristic that unites the artists presented. In Indonesia’s visual art world, unique for its history rooted in the *sanggar* or artist community, it remains common to encounter group or collective exhibitions. While sometimes it is the case that such groups form around an ideology, it is just as common for logistical reasons to unite artists (i.e. it is much easier to show together than alone). In the case of “Tetap Terang” it is both far simpler and more complicated than this. For while it is obvious that these artists have been brought together to celebrate Kartini Day because they are women, each artist’s creative development and mode of aesthetic expression differs, making it difficult to pinpoint or simplify what unifies these individuals. Although it is impossible to do justice in a few short paragraphs to the diversity of experience, artistic concept, and creative practice represented by the artists of “Tetap Terang,” below I provide snapshots, albeit brief of each artist’s trajectory as well as the details of their work included in this exhibition in order to reveal what can be understood as the bricolage of women’s voices presents in Indonesia’s art world today.

Arahmaiani (b.1961), born in Bandung, was initially trained at ITB. Early in her career, she established herself as a pioneer in the field of performance art. In the last four decades, while Indonesia remains a site key to her practice, Arahmaiani has spent a great deal of time abroad, in part due to the reception of works like “Lingga-Yoni” (1994) at home. Today, she splits her time between Germany where she is a visiting professor at the University of Passau and Tibet where she collaborates with Buddhist monks and local villagers to foster greater environmental consciousness through ongoing community projects. As part of “Tetap Terang,” Arahmaiani’s work builds on her ongoing interest in dialogue as achieved through the visual expression of letters taken from the pegon script, a form of Arabic used to write old Javanese. Depicted in bright colors and a subtle range of grays, these letters point to the syncretic nature of Indonesia’s religious past, a key interest in Arahmaiani’s practice as well as the exploration of her identity as a Muslim woman.

Sally Smart (b.1960), considered one of Australia’s most significant contemporary artists has since the 1990s exhibited her work globally in sites ranging from the United States to China. Her practice, centered on the production of large-scale cut out assemblage installations, engages with identity politics and ideas relating to the body, home, and history. Despite Australia’s close proximity to Indonesia, Smart’s work was first displayed here in 2005 as part of the Jogja Biennale. Since then her relationship with Indonesia’s art world has grown thanks to collaborations such as her 2016 two-person exhibition with Entang Wiharso at the Indonesian National Gallery entitled, *Conversation: Endless Acts in Human History.* For “Tetap Terang, Smart’s works come from her renowned series *The Exquisite Pirate,* in which the woman pirate acts as a metaphor for the contemporary global issues of personal and social identity, cultural instability, immigration, and hybridity.

Sinta Tantra (b.1979), described as a British artist of Balinese descent, while having spent the majority of her life in the United Kingdom, recalls important memories of long-vacations spent with family in Bali, her parents’ place of birth. Recognized for her site-specific installations in public spaces, Tantra’s works are described as a hybridity of pop and formalism, a bricolage of color and rhythm, and an exploration of identity and aesthetics. For this exhibition Tantra continues her exploration of the aesthetics of ritual, entwined with the notion of living art central to Balinese culture that acted as key referents in her most recent solo exhibition, *A House in Bali,* held in Jakarta in November 2017. Having produced large-scale installations in sites ranging from London to Hong Kong, Sinta describes the experience of exhibiting in Indonesia, for the first time in 2009, as an important one that has contributed to her ongoing understanding of how people in different parts of the world interact or communicate through visual expression.

Natisa Jones (b.1989), born in Jakarta, was raised in Bali. She attended high school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, university in Melbourne, and now splits her time between Indonesia (Bali and Jakarta) and the Netherlands (Amsterdam). Her practice, rooted in her own, ongoing process of internal dialogue, explores themes concerning identity and the human condition. As she states, by incorporating text onto image such as the simple yet strong “able” (as written on the large-scale canvas presented for “Tetap Terang”), she is able to pull narratives from daily life, to explore issues within identity and reflect on ideas of the ‘self.’ Having navigated varied contexts throughout her life – both cultural and linguistic – it is striking that Natisa’s texts more often than not appear in English, a fact that is perhaps testament to her experience of foreignness even in a place like Bali. While she is Indonesian, she is not Balinese. Educated abroad in contexts as different as Thailand and Australia, the strength of Natisa’s work might be seen in part, the product of a lifelong journey of determining one’s position within a particular context – an experience, not unique to Natisa.

Ines Katamso (b.1990), born in Yogyakarta describes herself as “anak-campur” or a kid of mixed-nationality. Her father Indonesian, her mother French, Ines spent the first ten years of her life in Yogyakarta, before moving to France where she received her education in art-design and fashion-design. Shortly after graduation Ines then returned to Indonesia in order to develop her ever-expanding creative practice first as a fashion designer with her own shoe-brand, later as a muralist, and now as a painter. Speaking with Ines about her decision to move from large wall spaces to canvas, she explains in a beautiful French accent, that on canvas she is able to explore within new parameters her interests in design and fashion as well as her own ability to express externally, a type of internal space related to how her own mind transforms distress and anxiety, the process of somatization, through which eczema appears on her hands. Each canvas, comprised of geometric shapes, lines, and organic forms (both plants and representations of her own hands) while at first glance whimsical, reminiscent of Natisa’s work, express a much deeper internal process of self-reflection and discovery.

Natasha Lubis (b.1989), born and raised in Jakarta received her undergraduate degree in Melbourne and more recently, her masters of fine art at Goldsmith’s College, London. Having recently returned to Indonesia, Natasha describes an experience of learning to navigate Indonesia’s art world in sites ranging from Jakarta her hometown to Bali, where she has based her studio since returning. Having spent her life in cosmopolitan contexts be they in Indonesia or abroad, Natasha’s work is influenced by popular culture and youth subcultures, like that of 1960s and 70s hippie counterculture. Through a residency at Ketemu Project Bali related to the celebration of the controversial Balinese female artist I Gak Murniasih or Murni as well as this exhibition devoted to Kartini, Natasha has begun to explore cultures and their associated visual repertoires that are closer to home as demonstrated in her digitally produced collage works that each center around found images of Indonesian history.

Ultimately what can be gathered from these brief and seemingly disparate snapshots is a mosaic of sorts illuminated by the diversity of which it is formed, unified by the common experience of Arahmaiani, Sally Smart, Sinta Tantra, Natisa Jones, Ines Katamso, and Natasha Lubis as female arts part of an ever-expanding network of which Indonesia is just one part. For some of the six artists represented, the question of participating in an exhibition of female artists was problematic – “why must gender speak above the work?” they asked. Whereas for others, participation raised the more critical question, “why in 2018, is it still necessary to draw attention to female artists?” A question that aligns with the now global movement for women’s equality, marked by calls to action like #MeToo. While these questions raised diverse viewpoints and critical concerns, in discussion with each artist I was continually struck by the mobility of each woman and the experiences had both in and beyond Indonesia, described in short above. For this mobility and experience is markedly different from that afforded to Kartini during her short life, the result of the era in which she lived.

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