

Balinese Contemporary Art: Between Ethnic Memory and Meta-questioning

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This article propose a definition of Balinese contemporary art that includes new ethnic art and *art brut*. On the basis of this definition is proposed a new classification of Balinese contemporary artists.

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It is not an easy task do define and delineate Balinese “contemporary” art, so peculiar is the position of Balinese culture in the larger Indonesian framework of Indonesia, and so resilient are indigenous values and cultural memory in the field of the arts. But defining Balinese art of the last 10 years is nevertheless what I am trying to do here.

An attempt was done in a previous issue of this magazine to provide a general definition of contemporary. A number of writers and a curator from the region were asked for an opinion. John Clark referred to a “mood,” which Kwok Kian Chow characterized by “the meta-position it (contemporary art) takes toward the art-world, by incorporating into art a critique of the art world system, value structure and institutions.” Berghuis commented still more broadly that contemporary art “rearranges our perceptions of time, place, and space, and challenges social behavior and public conduct.”

These definitions, convenient as they are, do not fully answer the conscious as well as unconscious role of cultural memory found in the works of many contemporary artists in Bali. The role in art of cultural memory is of course an old issue, which predates contemporary art in today’s understanding of the word. Most infamous in the matter was Clement Greensberg saying in 1957 that the Japanese “Gutai” artists, on their first exhibition in the States, came “very close” to warrant the quality of “modern”, but “not quite” enough —because there was in their work an irreducible “otherness”, the resilience of their indigenous culture. Yet, this

“otherness”, which was to Greensberg a scar, became later the foundation of a new recognition, this time “contemporary”. This development was born from a new reality: as capitalism and modernity dug and penetrated ever deeper into the world’s cultures, the presence of indigenous elements in the latter’s art could not be ignored anymore. The groundbreaking exhibition *The Magicians of the Earth*, held in 1989 in Paris took this new reality into account. In the words of its curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, one could not have “one hundred percent of exhibitions ignoring 80 percent of the earth (JMartin, Jean Hubert: 3).” He argued that to continue to ignore the contemporaneity of artist from so-called “archaic” or “Third World” societies “was to do act as if their creators were not alive, as if they were simply ghosts reviving old civilisations that had forever disappeared.” This development was in line with the concomitant criticism of modern concepts undertaken by the post-modern thinkers of the time. Yet, in those days, the cultural memory J-H Martin was concerned with was simply deemed “present”. Whether and why this cultural memory was consciously expressed or not was not an issue. But this is not all. Behind this memory, how to classify the non-Western “brut” or “outsider” artists? Those whose creativity has spontaneously grown outside all mainstreams and code systems —international, national and ethnic— and who, no less than others, “challenge social behavior and public conduct” in their own way, to cite Berghuis above. I choose below to classify them as contemporary.

All this makes for a fluid definition of the contemporary in Balinese art and a spectrum of

artists wider than usually understood by art critics. At times contemporary art indeed comes out as a meta-questioning—I prefer this word to meta-positioning—of reality, and at others as the surging of new technical approaches and challenging themes derived from the artist's tradition. In the latter instance, this may be done purposely, aimed at revamping traditional values or affirming one's identity—see Ketut Budiana for the former attitude and the Sanggar Dewata artists for the latter. Or this may also occur unconsciously, modern techniques breaking open the strict codes of tradition and enabling a free and personalized expression of ethnic values—see Made Djirna. Finally there are also instances in which artists express themselves in a codeless marginal way. They are the “brut” (raw) and “outsiders” creators Dubuffet was so fond of, whose works are on the margin of contemporary art—see Murniasih and Wayan Sadha below.

All the artists mentioned above, and others of the same ilk, are the product of wide range of contradictory cultural determinants; rural/urban, educated in Bali/Java/uneducated etc. They have experienced them across several generations and different political and social settings—Sukarno nationalist and Soeharto military regimes; before and during the growth of mass tourism. But all are, today, now simultaneously creative. As a result, the spectrum of the art they produce is extremely wide. At the one end are artists, often middle age and of rural origin, whose works are most informed by identity concerns and Balinese cultural memory and/or more outwardly “modern”, and at the other end those, usually young and urban, whose works are clearly in line with the full-fledged contemporary meta-questioning mentioned above. Somewhere in between there are the “outsiders”. Further complicating the picture is that several of these artists combine a relatively conventional career of painter with a more daring one of installation or performance artist, a fact facilitated by the resilient tradition of collective labor in Balinese society. Usually harnessed for the making of ritual wooden/bamboo structures, this labor is now channelled by them into the making of contemporary installations.

Of the ethnic side of contemporaneity, the most “Balinese” artist is undoubtedly Ketut Budiana (61). He is not indeed the only one whose works refers to ethnic heritage. But instead of accepting it passively,

like traditional painters in the village are doing, or making it a tool to affirm ethnic identity, as do many artists from his generation—see below, he reflects on its symbolism and eventually personalizes it in a highly original way. He displays a technique and an aesthetic—of space in particular—which, albeit both highly evolutionary, refer to Balinese tradition. Stylistically, his works look “fantastic”. They feature monstrous characters lurking behind whirling clouds in which darkness melts into light and light into darkness, symbolizing the violent unfurling of opposing cosmic forces. In this sense, they are spiritually connoted as Hindu-Balinese. But this clash of cosmic forces is also that of the earth and the modern destructive forces that threaten its balance. These may not look contemporary, but their original presence is unmistakable. Another artist on the fringe of tradition is Wayan Sudiarta. In his works, human sexuality is also the encounter of cosmic forces. Sex is the unity of the opposites, and thus creation. So he draws sexual scenes on huge eggs—the egg of the cosmic origin, and the egg as promise of birth. Sex, featured in all sorts of normal and marginal forms, is thus rehabilitated by its symbolism.

Ethnicity as a goal, as Balinese-ness, was the banner of the first generations of academy/Java-educated Balinese, in the years 1965-1980. Most of those artists were or are members of the Sanggar Dewata association. Typically their works represent Balinese symbols, or iconic Balinese themes, within an aesthetic framework derived from modern art. Their Balinese-ness, however, was largely engineered. They reached their productive years when the strongly anti-communist Suharto regime virtually banned social art and encouraged expression of Indonesian cultural heritage. With time, however, and with the growth of tourism and the take-over of the local economy by outside capital, this focus on tradition has turned into a systematic expression of ethnic identity—increasingly Hindu in its referential content and increasingly political too as an indirect statement of identity. This evolution raises political questions: are Balinese, by delving into revamped religious symbolism, politically reshaping their identity around an exclusively ethnic base? Or is the official political pluralism of the Indonesian state at last finding a concrete implementation in the field of the arts. I wager it is both.

Apart from its founder, Nyoman Gunarsa (67) and to a lesser extent, Wayan Sika (62), the most important artist of the group is Nyoman Erawan (53). To him Hindu symbols are not merely instrumental references of identity, as with too many artists from the 1965-1980 years. They come from the deepest core of his personality: apart from being a contemporary artist, he is also active as a traditional sculptor and architect (*undagi*). Not unsurprisingly, the symbols one sees in his paintings and installations—colors of the cardinal directions, Chinese coins, cosmic mountain—, are the same as those he uses when making, let us say, a cremation sarcophagus. They only differ in their aesthetic language, now that of abstraction instead of narrative figuration. All express the notions of a life force surging and waning away, of Man engulfed in the great cosmic whirling. But it is not in his painting that Nyoman Erawan's contribution is the most outstanding, but in his installations/performance: he turns around the Balinese tradition of bamboo decorated ritual structures into a tool to express his Balinese identity and, through it ponder about Man's position in the world and cosmos at large. Prominent among his installations was *Latamahosadhi* (1997), named after a mythical healing plant, consisting of a 10 meter-high rectangular screen on which he threw, from a distance, huge pots of paint that came breaking on the cloth in a riot of the four cosmic colors, while *kecak* dancers called out to the gods from below the screen. In a more recent work, discussed three years ago in this magazine, though, he went beyond ethnicity, he made "breast-burgers"—burgers shaped like women breasts—which were then eaten by a Western "tourist". This was to protest the image of Bali as the land of topless women spread by tourism and Western artists.

There are many artists in the same creative line as Nyoman Erawan (53), especially in painting. But some have forged their own specific manner. Made Sumadiyasa (40), for example, uses wide brush strokes of color to symbolize the infinite cosmos. But most outstanding among them is Made Djirna (54), who will be discussed in a next issue of the magazine. In his works, he does not aim at expressing his identity through the use of Balinese symbols. He instead reads reality, that of his social and private life, in the light of the Balinese notion of *Rwabhinna*. This provides his works with a deep, haunting depth.

A peculiar case among the Java-educated artists from the 1965-1980 generation is Made Wianta (62). In fact, among the artists of his generation, he is the one whose works are closest to the notion of meta-questioning discussed above. Even though village-born, he openly opposes the expression of ethnicity in art, especially when it focuses on the affirmation of one's ethnic identity. His perspective is Indonesia, rather than Bali-oriented. In the big struggle between the local and the global, he sides with the global. Yet, his painting are unwittingly Balinese: His 1970s works featured shapeless monsters that were among the strongest expressions of the subconscious found in Indonesian art. In the mid-1980s, he shifted to abstraction, but this archetypal abstraction retained structural elements typical of traditional figuration: patterning, full occupation of space, line delineating flat color surfaces. It was abstraction made "Balinese". Yet, in the last fifteen years, his creative thrust has shifted to installations. In 1999, as wars raged in both Yugoslavia and East Timor. Wianta responded by creating an extraordinary installation-cum-performance on the beach of Padang Galak in Sanur, involving a two-kilometer long piece of cloth with the word "peace" written on it in dozens of the world languages. Three years later, a tragic occasion presented itself for a still more powerful installation: "Dreamland", Wianta's reaction to the horror of the Bali bombing. Imagine a dark exhibition room. There are no lights; the walls and ceiling are all painted black. But approach the walls with your torchlight and an eerie show little by little unfolds, as the light focuses on the paintings hung on the walls. Photographs covered in blood, and, in transparency behind the blood, ghastly scenes of death. Painted in cow blood. This show took Wianta to Venice in 2003. But even now, Wianta is constantly on the look out for new experiments. Look at the huge scissors ripping an old metallic plate on which one can read, half erased, the name of the national oil company Pertamina: the time has passed, he seems to tell us, oil is no more and ecology, perhaps is no more too.

Wianta's originality is that his works anticipated the trend that was becoming dominant in the following generations—when reference to ethnicity becomes secondary, and the cultural memory of younger artists, now increasingly urban, educated, and media-shaped, is less haunted by Balinese concepts and aesthetics and therefore rejoins that of other Indonesians.

Yet, the domination of the ethnic approach has lasted under new denominations—abstract expressionist, Yogya surrealism—well into the 1990s. The only genuine open challenge against it occurred in 2002 with the emergence of the Taksu group. The artists from this group rightly read the Sanggar Dewata's stylistic tendencies as politically determined by the New Order. They attacked the main actors of the Balinese art world and went on to propose a kind of art socially informed by social issues and, for some of them, by Marxism. Yet, at the end of the day, it came to very little: the main proponent of the group, Mahendra did not wait long to shift to provocative realism and then to the (pseudo-)reinterpretation of media and art history icons of the kind that has now invaded Indonesian art for 10 years.

Social art eventually came back, from an unexpected quarter: at the tip of the brush of Mangu Putra (48), who had started his career painting landscapes. Like most of the Sanggar Dewata members, Mangu Putra is also Yogya-educated, although not as a painter, but as a design artist. From the beginning his manner was hyper-realistic, evolved from projector photographs of landscapes and natural objects. So ethnicity and political discourse have been absent. He sees his Balinese identity through the prism of the nation and, unlike many artists from his generation, does not feel any need to underline it: in his works there are no monsters, no cosmic reference, and even no structural elements to remind us of his ethnic identity. He has now turned away from depicting natural objects toward expressing issues of social concern. Many of his recent works explore his disappointment with the “national project”: independence has failed to fulfil its promises. Thus “Kartini” (2010), the iconic “mother” figure of Indonesians—in fact an early proponent of women's education, is shown as the old woman she never was—she died in her 20s—next to a ripped and bloodying red and white Indonesian flag. Another strong work is his “Reverence” (2007) showing monks seen from the back facing a range of mountains: a hidden strong, yet subtle, praise of the balance of Man and Nature, and the only indirect link to a Balinese traditional concept. He shows in these works an uncanny ability to create rich multi-layered symbols with very simple figurative icons.

Of roughly the same generation as Mangu, and also Yogya-educated, are arguably the biggest, Bali-

born, stars of Indonesian contemporary art: Nyoman Masriadi (38) and Putu Sutawijaya (40). Neither will be discussed in this article. Nyoman Masriadi epitomizes the Balinese artist largely “de-cultured” by his encounter with Java urban-based modernity. Yet it is his alien-ness in Yogya that rendered him sensitive to the shock of modernity. A modernity that he confronts head on with irony in works made with a well-contoured, Leger-looking graphic hand. Probably a great artist in the making, if he learns to mature unheeding of the market. Putu Sutawijaya's works are no less easily recognizable. As I argue in an article to be published in C-arts' upcoming issue, his paintings and sculptures, of men groping for and as if lost in space, embody the tension between the cosmos-centrist understanding of Man of Balinese culture, and the anthropocentrism of the Western and modern Man.

New talents are showing up among new generation artists. Not all fully master the mix of idea and techniques distinctive of meta-questioning contemporary art, but the signs are nevertheless abounding of a new surging creativity. For some artists, ethnic themes still appear, but they come from a Balinese traditional memory which is now reduced to reflexive and referential left-overs, as it competes with the new trans-ethnic and trans-national culture spread by the new media and modernity in general.

Among those artists, one has already started making a name: Suklu (44). First educated at the ISI art institute in Bali, and then in Bandung, his early works were paintings whose almost exclusive subject matter were women. Banal, some will say. Perhaps. Except that he showed in its treatment an unordinary psychological depth, a trait,—a subjective evaluation by this writer—that is in itself a prominent determinant of quality. Yet, after some stuttering, during which he followed Wianta's line, Suklu has turned in the last few years into a significant installation artist in his own right. His favorite topic is usually about the balance of Nature and Man, or ecology, themes in which Balinese notions rejoin contemporary concerns. But to the writer, his installation masterpiece is the “linggayoni”, or “Pradana-Purusa”, which he has recently exhibited at “Jakarta Contemporary”, consisting of drum to represent the lingga, and mesh-wire to represent the woman's pubic hair, and hence, the yoni. An extraordinary rendering of the banal theme of the Rwabhinnedia union of the opposites.

Younger than Suklu are artists like Kun Adnyana (35), Sani, Supena (40), Susena (42). Kun Adnyana draws with the pen a mix of painstakingly realistic characters – his own child or people from his environment—and iconic patterns –trees, human figurines—in such a way that appear a surreal world in which Man and Nature at times melt harmoniously, and at other face one another in a confronting way. One feels a longing for the Balinese *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy of balance of Man, Nature and the godly-- a balance now threatened by the occurrence of modernity. Another interesting evolution is that of Supena. He started his career as a talented, albeit otherwise ordinary abstract painter. He has now shifted to sculpture: his series of hanging head, some fully carved, others letting natural wood and carved parts combine with one another, are an interesting reminder of Man's place not against, but within nature. On the general theme of nature one must also mention Susena. Susena covers his canvas with a succession of simple, one-time thrusts. There are no signs of hesitation. One can see on the canvas the lines drawn by the individual hairs of the brush. An air of unreality—and sometimes natural realism—pervades the atmosphere as these brightly colored brush-strokes butt against flat color surfaces. It is abstraction turning into nature, a nature reduced to rock, water and fire, whirling into circle or hurled into the nothingness of the infinite. A far cry from the ordinary medley of forms and colors so common among the Balinese imitators of Abstract Expressionism. Yet, arguably more promising is Putu Wirantawan (39)'s geometrical cosmology, the elements of which are somehow all eerily linked to one another in strange construction of geometrical figures. The reference here is obviously the Balinese *Bwana Agung* or *Macrocosm* and its infinite microcosmical duplicates, a recurrent theme in Balinese mythological cosmology. But Putu Wirantawan's reinvents in a highly original way the representation of these themes. Other artists to follow are Nyoman Sani (36), a young woman artist who makes installations using catwalk presentations, Surya Dharma (29) who recently made a performance during which, treading in a basin of blood, he broke dozens of plates while enumerating the "bloody" events of Balinese history. For Surya Dharma and many of the young artists of his generation, most of whom are city-educated, Balinese ethnic memory has become, if not totally dead, irrelevant. The only significant exception is

Teja Astawa (40), who "reconstructs" pre-colonial painting in a pseudo-naive way, with icons of his own making.

I have insisted at the beginning of this writing on the importance of Balinese "brut" art, the art of outsider artists. The most famous of the latter is Murniasih (1966-2006). Before she passed away five years ago, Murniasih was a regular participant in contemporary events, with works which were an extraordinary expression of women's sexuality. Yet, her expression of this sexuality is not that of sophisticated meta-questioning. It is that of a Balinese village girl, educated outside the island, who, having experienced sexual violence in her teens, gropes for an expressive outlet in her own marginal way. And she finds it after coming into contact with Dewa Mokoh, a traditional painter from Pengosekan, near Ubud. If her works can be construed as a demand that women have control over their own body, so be it, but the reality is that she expresses spontaneously, without the normative burden of long education, simply to give way to an obsessive urge. Yet the result is quite extraordinary. The vagina may be an eye gaping with complicity or an innocent flower; the male's object of cocky pride a hen's beak or an unimpressive hose, when it doesn't stick out "just like that" like a fast growing tuber, with leaves and the rest. The breasts may be amorphous creatures of their own, hanging deflated and unrecognizable as such if it were not for a lonely nipple. Images of bodies on the loose, her works speak and describe the whole life-cum-love process, free of all restraints. Sexual intercourse takes place, in its many hues and shades, variants and symbols, in "normal" and "abnormal" ways. Yet, is Murni perverse? No her depiction of sex and body follow a very natural logic: It exposes wildly her awakening to her body as feminine, sexual and motherly. Oddly enough, that in itself is already marginal.

Another interesting case of brut expression is Wayan Sadha's (63), a Balinese cartoonist of local repute. Most Indonesian cartoonists see reality from "above," with the lens of their formal education. And what they see is black and white, high and low, good and bad. Sadha on the contrary sees life from below, from the mud of the earth, the dust of the roads. His is the world of the Balinese *kampung*, the voice of the poor, stinky, unattractive, sometimes vulgar and always ordinary. But also funny, free and simple.

His cartoons deal with the other side of reality, one that is never touched by other Balinese. Big mouth, protruding teeth, disorderly hair or bald head, often bare-breasted, and, for women, big breasts, big legs and big mouths; people just like they are in daily life. Should we say that Wayan Sadha never went beyond the first grade of primary education and that he recently became the winner of a Balinese literary award. He is the authentic marginal, who grew on his own as artist and writer.

In a similar league with Wayan Sadha is a much younger glass painter from Nagasepeha, Ketut Santosa who uses the glass-technique of his village tradition as a means of social criticism.

On the whole, what stands out in the review of the artists above is indeed the long resilience of Balinese memory, be it as statement or simply passive expression: during the colonial period it had already evolved from narrative to decorative, within an aesthetic that remained Balinese. Then with the artists of Sanggar Dewata it turned philosophical and identity-related. It is now relegated to a vaguely cosmological philosophy, when not replaced by an equally vague advocacy of ecological concerns. So Balinese memory is still there, but slowly and unconsciously withering away, in particular regarding its aesthetics. But at the same time, and unlike contemporary artists throughout Asia, very

few local Balinese artists engage in the kind of conscious meta-questioning that would open them a new space of liberty amid the changes capitalistic modernity is compelling on them, their culture and their island. Most are content with finding visual tricks which they hope will open a recognizable market niche.

If they want to retain some of their identity, Balinese artists need a deeper intellectual awareness of the changes in the world around them.

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