

# JURNAL KAJIAN SENI

VOLUME 02, No. 02, April 2016: 151-163

## THE 'NEW ENEMY': POLITICS OF RELIGION IN INDONESIA AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRACTICES

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper wishes to investigate the relation between the politics of religion and the consequent effects on the contemporary art practices in Indonesia during the last decade. By looking at two major cases: Dadang Christanto's exhibition in 2002 and "Pinkswing Park" from 2005 CP Biennale, the article takes an incursion into the relations between religion and politics by looking at how and in what ways the Islamic extremist groups can influence and restrict freedom of expression in a democratic country. I argue that the Islamic fundamentalists are representing the new enemies in the current freedom of expression, after the previous eras which saw the presence of other enemies: the state and the military, affecting both the levels of nation policies, contemporary art world and the individual artistic practice.*

**Keywords:** *religious fundamentalists, new enemy, contemporary art, censorship, Islam*

### **Abstrak**

Tulisan ini bertujuan menelisik relasi antara politik agama dengan dampak-dampaknya terhadap praktik seni kontemporer di Indonesia selama satu dekade terakhir. Dengan melihat dua kasus besar: pameran Dadang Christanto pada 2002 dan "Pinkswing Park" dari CP Biennale 2005, tulisan ini mendalami relasi-relasi antara agama dan politik dengan mencermati proses dan cara-cara yang dipakai oleh kelompok-kelompok ekstrimis Islam dalam memengaruhi serta membatasi kebebasan berekspresi di suatu negara yang berbasis demokrasi. Saya berpendapat bahwa para fundamentalis Islam merepresentasikan musuh-musuh baru dari kebebasan berekspresi, selepas era yang menghadapi musuh-musuh lain: institusi pemerintah dan militer, selanjutnya memberi dampak pada level-level kebijakan nasional, dunia seni kontemporer maupun praktik artistik individual.

**Kata kunci:** *kelompok fundamentalis keagamaan, musuh baru, seni kontemporer, penyensoran, Islam*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the recent discourse concerning the role of the arts in society and its relation to different forms of power, arts have been mainly researched in its relation with politics and culture, especially in the contemporary realm where art takes the ambition of being either a 'mirror' that reflects the socio-political changes, or at times a 'hammer' that can shape and mold the society, as the Marxist theorist Leon Trotsky once stated. Little has been said about the power of religion in both politics and art, or moreover the connection between the three spheres as strongly influencing one another in a country where the border and intersection between religion, art and politics is very thin. Such a complex equation can be found in Indonesia, a country which hosts the biggest population of Islam followers in the context of post-colonial state democratic practice and where thousands of forms of art and culture coexist with both the traditional and contemporary realms.

This paper wishes to focus on the relation between the political power structures of religion and contemporary art practices in Indonesia that became censored and restricted by several religious groups in the last decades after the Reformation. By referring to two important cases presented in the media as a result of the Islamic radical interventions in the private spaces of two galleries – Jakarta CP Biennale 2005 and Dadang Christanto's exhibition at Bentara Budaya Jakarta in 2002, the paper will shed a new light on the relation

and influence of religion power and censorship on the contemporary artistic practices.

To avoid the misunderstanding between the different relations between religion and art, this paper will not discuss religious art, nor the similarities or differences between art and religion. The attention is given to the influences of religious practices that take a political stance and importance on the contemporary artistic practice in a democratic country.

One important aspect in the dual relation between art and religion is that it can be seen from multiple similarities, even as two entities that work on the same principles and create similar effects and experiences toward those who adopt their ideologies and aesthetics. However, when it comes to coexist, the art and religion relation transforms into art versus religion, especially if we contextualize art in the current practice of contemporary realm where artistic forms come to represent, criticize and reflect on the day to day realities, memories of social and political unrest, unspoken elements of history, and socio-political developments. In this context, religion remains as the institution with orthodox fundamental views, whereas the arts evolve and reflect society in a metaphoric or direct way, resulting in different types of aesthetic experiences.

If we are trying to look for the red thread between art and religion, then we could find it in the values that both art and religion are putting forward as ideology. Art is looking at the meaning

and value found beyond the form itself, the form of nature, of human behavior, the form the dogmatic system takes, or the form of life. Therefore, art in the wider sense is a strategy to insert deeper the possibilities of giving sense to things in the experience, nature and humanity (Sugiharto, 2013:25). Although these similarities between the purpose or the fundamental values of art and religion exist, it has come that they oppose in great manner, and religion at times oppresses art to be freely expressed, particularly due to its power to change the values attributed to human experiences, morality and social behavior.

In contemporary art, artists have become more political - they express issues concerning the situation of their own localities through metaphors, or by reflecting the social reality at large. In a country inhabiting the largest population of Islamic followers, how can contemporary artistic practice be freely expressed? Radicals and fundamentalists have come to take a position when the values depicted disturb the religious dogmas or they abuse the morality promoted, especially since they have gained more freedom after the fall of president Suharto. Therefore, the enemy contemporary artists in Indonesia is facing today has ceased to be the system, military or infrastructure as it has been experienced in the previous decades, and it has been replaced by the religious extremists and their increasing political power.

This paper wishes to look at the types of enemies Indonesian contemporary art

has experienced in previous decades, as well to classify the "new enemy" of the decade. Through my hypothesis concerned with the emergence of a new enemy represented by religious extremists, how and in what ways are these groups impacting the situation of contemporary art freedom of expression through the selected study cases? And moreover, in what ways is censorship connected with the religious group extremists?

### **Religion and State Affair**

Throughout Indonesia's history, religion has been merged in politics to a large extent however it has only reached its peak during Suharto's rule when religion became excessively bureaucratized. Starting with the era of Dutch Indies, Islamic religion was considered a political threat that could mobilize people to social unrest. Different was seen during the Japanese occupation (1942-1945) when Islam became a strategy of war and Islamic followers would join into a special unit of state administration against the Dutch. This group claimed to have contributed to Indonesia's independence and argued for an Islamic state, while non-Muslims and other religions pleaded for a state for all religions. The year of 1945 saw a compromise in Indonesia's Constitution where the country did not become a secular state since it has stated through the first principle of Pancasila the belief in one almighty God, however it did not specify which god or religion. In order to accommodate the Islamic groups formed since the beginning of the state, in 1946,

the government established a Ministry of Religious Affairs that would change the power of religions in Indonesia.

During Sukarno's reign, religion was seen as neutral, but it has set the ground for religious extremists with the implementation of the law in 1965 concerning the "Prevention of Blasphemy and Abuse of Religions". The law has been used by Suharto to guard the power of religions in public space, constituting an administration that would recognize five state religions, excluding Confucianism. Suharto has also implemented the law that all citizens must choose a religion to be printed in their identity cards, and in 1989 religion became legal identity through the Religious Court Act. The formed Ministry of Religion Affairs serves as an executive organ in the government, and it gives a bureaucratic basis that penetrates the administration and makes differences between people. Through Indonesia's state administrative agencies and its judicial branch, religion's authority has been co-opted by the state and strengthened its power over people's everyday life. In such an organized form, religion becomes an administrative affair, threatening its spirituality (Cahyadi, 2015).

On the other side, there is a growing religious intolerance and conflict in Indonesia that influences the relations between both the majority and minority faith communities in the process of democratic consolidation. Although it can still be debated on whether Indonesia is or is not a secular country, several instances

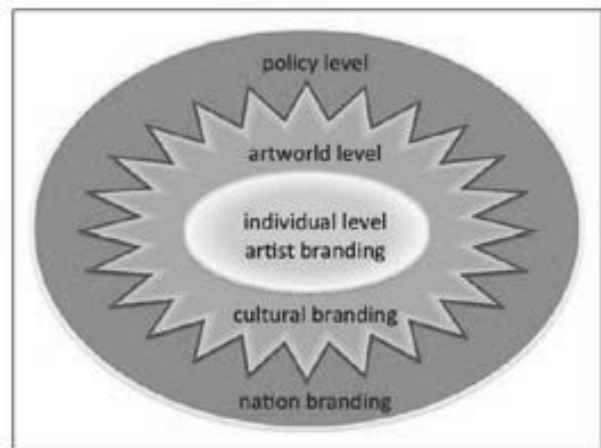
have shown that there are demands to enforce the *Shari'a* Islamic law by several religious groupings such as PAN (National Mandate Party), PPP (United Development Party) and PKS (Prosperous Justice Party). These political parties tend to favor Islamist agendas, putting forward the argument that 'sharia' legislation is an effective means of combating gambling, alcohol consumption and prostitution, a petition that was countered in 2006 when 56 legislators asked president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to revoke 'sharia-inspired bylaws (Bush, 2008). The main issue with the implementation of the law is its incompatibility with the democratic practices of a modern state, where the freedom of expression of intellectuals, activists, and political elites is threatened.

The separation of religion and state is the core tenant of modern liberal democracy. Despite having achieved the consolidation of democracy, Indonesia has seen the emergence of some anti-liberal groups and 'radical' movements. In the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy, local governments have gained authority to create regional religious regulations taking the name of *shari'a* bylaws that regulate religions norms (Ahmad Faud Fanani via Crouch, 2009:53). The same author mentions that more than 52 cities and regencies in Indonesia have applied the *shari'a* bylaw regulations at regional levels, showing how Islamic radicals have stepped forward in constitutional issues, discrimination and governance.

**From Nation Policies to Individual Artistic Practice – three spheres of interest**

Victor L. Rodner and Chloe Preece (2015) have undergone research on the spheres of branding in art markets in two different developing countries. Their diagram looks at the artistic discourse as the core where an individualized branding takes place, followed by the artworld level who disseminates the works of the artist to a wider audience, developing the sphere of cultural branding. Lastly, they show the nation branding level that goes hand in hand with the cultural policies and the image the country wishes to portray. The research argues that nation branding is working against the individual artistic branding because of the cultural policies that jeopardize the cultural sector of the country.

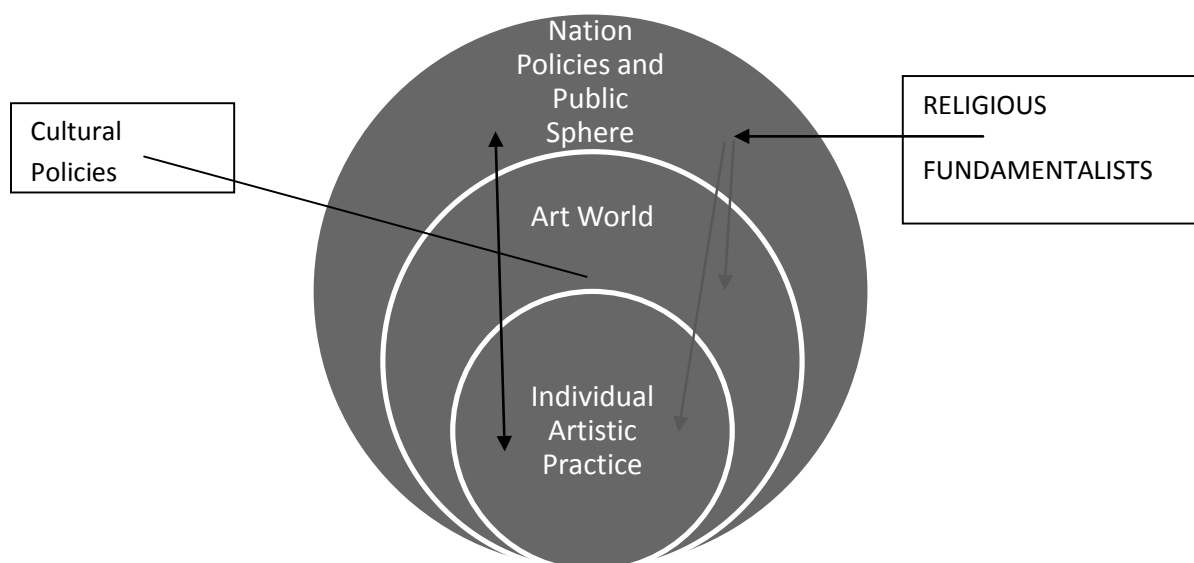
For my personal enquiry in the relation between nation policies and their effects on the contemporary artistic practices in



**Picture 1.** Diagram Spheres of Branding (Rodner and Preece, *ibidem*: 2)

Indonesia, I have taken their scheme as an inspiration for the following diagram.

The first level is represented by the individual artist as a creative being that conceives forms of work based on his personal interest, statement and beliefs as an artist. This level belongs to the artist that takes his inspirations and concerns from external factors and personal experiences with issues concerning the history, the day to day realities and aesthetics strategies.



**Diagram 1.** Spheres of Influence

The second level is defined by the art world where the artists' functions and works as a social being and as an artist. This level is constructed by what Pierre Bourdieu (1996) names as "art fields" where a particular world is formed by the rules of art and institutions. Without going further into explaining how the art world is created, I will remain at the social influences of Fundamentalists on the art field itself and on the individual practice of the artist. In Indonesia the art infrastructure is porous, and lacks a systematic coordination with almost non-existent connections with the government officials. In this context, the large population of the country has not been in contact, nor understands how the particular world of contemporary art is formed and exists in the country and what type of aesthetics it promotes. Fundamentally, the two level spheres work closely together forming what we call as the art world, where the artistic practices and discourse are created as it happens in different nations and territories.

Furthermore, it is in this context that cultural policies are formed in relation to the current artistic practices. Since Indonesia does not have clear cultural policies in regard to contemporary art practices, the subjects and themes to be explored remain at the choice of the individual artist in a context where contemporary art scene is organically formed by the very initiatives of the art practitioners themselves and not with the help of government laws, policies or institutions.

Both the artist level and the culture policy making level are strongly influenced by the outside layer found in the nation policies layer. The policy level of the nation branding and identity formed by the principles of Pancasila dictates what is allowed and not to produce in one's country and what values are promoted or denied. This last level presents great interest in this paper as being the one where religion takes an important position affecting the cultural and artistic practices of the society at large and of the individual artist.

In order to understand how the nation-policy level influences the art world and the individual as an artist, we need to look at the history of censorship in art, as well as at the political policies and changes that have occurred in relation to arts in Indonesia. Since the proclamation of the country, both Sukarno and Suharto have organized campaigns and efforts into unifying the various ethnical groups in a unitary body of citizens that would adhere to the political values of Pancasila. In remote villages where *adat* was part of their daily lives, the unification methods changed the culture and ritual of the regions by ratifying them with the promoted national values. It was a very consistent and insistent process to spread Pancasila to all citizens of Indonesia where culture has been staged and performed as art, not by following the traditional steps from its origins but the ideologies imposed (Acciaoli, 1985).

In this context numerous performances have been modified and

altered so as to align with the religious and political values. One example which Robert Hefner (1987: 76) provides in his research in order to see the strong influence of politics on culture is the 'tayuban' dance, which in its original form was performed by a woman and a man dancing together, where men tip woman for their 'services', at the end the participants treating themselves with alcohol. Although the dance was said to have been performed for fertility rites, but it has been abolished by Muslim reformists stating that it shows sexual behavior and improper gestures. This research shows how the development of dance tradition in the region of East Java provides a point to assess two currents: the decline of regional traditions and the growing influence of Islam.

However, there is a different dynamic for contemporary artistic practices which do not come from traditions nor rituals, but are forms of expression that present aspects of the macro system exposing those issues and problems we face as individuals, closely aligned with the dynamics of the globalized world and contemporary art trends in the region and abroad. Since its beginning, contemporary art tends to be more political and free to be practiced in the context of democratization.

### **Three Phases of Enemies and Censorship in Contemporary Indonesia**

In this part I wish to present the three stages closely connected with the three enemies that art in Indonesia has been facing until today, starting with the

era of modernism and going to the late practices of 2000. The survey presents only a general view on the main dynamics of the stages in relation to the 'enemies' encountered.

According to Farah Wardani's presentation at the 2014 Symposium in Yogyakarta<sup>1</sup>, art during the leader Sukarno was mostly related to propaganda and nation identity building. Modern art in the post-colonial and independence era was conceived as a medium to define nation identity with Sudjojono as its prominent figure, as well as seeing the growth of the first artist association under the name of Persagi in 1937 and Pelukis Rakyat group. The artists of these groups worked with conventional media and have questioned the specificity of Indonesian art in a time when the colonial reminiscences were still being felt, with artists mainly portraying the "mooi indie" landscapes of the beautiful nature encountered.

In this first stage art was seeing the first form of censorship, such as the case presented by Felencia Hutabarat (2015: 52), when the public screening of the movie "The Long March" has raised discontent and protests among military and PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party). Therefore, we shall call the first enemy stage as the military, who have first censored arts and used it in the purposes of propaganda.

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<sup>1</sup>The recordings of the Symposium held in November 2014 at Pascasarjana Universitas Gadjah Mada are part of my personal archive.

After the Second World War, Indonesia saw the emergence of the New Order era and the birth of the Art Institutions – ASRI in Yogyakarta and ITB in Bandung, together with Jakarta Art Institute (IKJ). Suharto continued to ban and cancel a series of art practices ranging from music, theater, or cultural events that were connected with PKI up until 1990s before the Reformation. The second enemy encountered in this phase is clearly the state and the harsh dictatorship of Suharto that has repressed artists to freely express their will. During late 1970s, artists were beginning to make a change towards the art system and the aesthetics promoted by the art institutions that were focusing on painting, sculpture and crafts as forms of art that were promoted, accepted and perpetuated. The strong relation with the political power and the way art was commissioned and presented to the public influenced the new generation to take a new position, so in 1970 the group PIPA was formed to counteract the agenda of the New Order and tried to present different aesthetics that would be against the conventional art forms. The same period saw the emergence of the New Art Movement with students from ISI and ITB that would come to change the face of contemporary art in Indonesia.

Until the '90s artists were trying to turn their artistic practice and propose new forms of art as an alternative to the art institutions. This phase of putting out a critical discourse and orienting towards new forms of exploration and media as a manifesto against the old aesthetics of the

institutions was counteracting with the state enemy of Suharto and the alliance with the nation state building.

Nearing Suharto's fall, the art scene engaged itself and became more active in intervening with the socio-political cultural situations through social activism, when the society at large became more responsive to the declining power of the New Order regime. It was a moment when art entered the public stage, intending to make a change, reaching a wider audience through art happenings (activism, performance art, etc.) and relating to issues of capitalism, consumerism, Westernization, etc.

After 2000 and the Reformation period, Indonesia saw new trends in contemporary art that more or less characterizes the art scene today. According to Farah Wardani, the founder of Indonesian Visual Art Archive, art after 2000 can be divided into four main groups: one that includes the art market and the star system of artists joining the global art by participating in biannual and tri-annual events, the second being formed by independent spaces and communities that work close with cultural activists and cultural movements. The third type refers to the artistic practices that include experimentation with new media and the intersection with other disciplines such as biology or science, whereas the fourth group deals with art in public spaces.

In this phase it is important to look at who are the new enemies that artists are facing with if we look at the recent exhibitions and conflicts encountered. With the newly formed democracy and



decentralization of power, new authorities formed cultural policies that would align with their own religious values and principles and not with the one stated by the majority. This is the crucial moment when new religious groups were formed, such as Laskar Jihad, Laskar Jundullah and Laskar Hizbullah that wanted to protect the dignity of Muslims, as well to eradicate obscene activities (Ng, Al Zastrouw, 2006: 88 as cited in Hutabarat, 2011: 53).

These groups were formed to protest against activities that are considered as immoral, obscene, or generally against Islamic values. Among these activities, they have demolished or taken down public artworks and cancelled art events. The declining power of the central authority by the state gives room for these radical groups to implement street justice leading to civil art censorship.

### **Islamic Radicals and the Intervention in Private Space – Dadang Christanto and Agus Suwage**

As Katerina Bruch presented in her research on art censorship in Indonesia after undertaking a residency in Yogyakarta at Langgeng Art Foundation, censorship of different art forms in public spaces in Indonesia have become quite common in the recent years and it has seen some cases, such as the removal of the sculptural work in Purwakarta in 2010 or the removal of Nyoman Nuarta's statue in Riau, Sumatra, considered erotic due to the large depiction of bottoms of the female dancers. Other examples show how the Islamic organizations work in

cancelling and putting down several events that took place in public space which are all connected with the excuse of being pornographic or ethically not suitable to show in public. Apart from these examples, there are two other cases I wish to present, of contemporary art exhibitions that took place in two privately owned spaces and have been altered respectively because of Islam fundamentalists.

The first example is the 2002 exhibition at Bentara Budaya in Jakarta which presented the works by the renowned Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto entitled "The Unspeakable Horror", curated by Hendro Wiyanto. The exhibition showcased, through the medium of painting, sculpture and installation, the sensitive issue of the communist massacre in 1965. At the entrance of the building the artist has exhibited the installation "They Give Evidence" composed by 14 bigger than life-size terracotta sculptures depicting the victims of the homicide, carrying bodies of man, woman and children victims in outstretched hands, work which currently is in the collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales. The work was also shown in Japan and Australia, and audience felt so touched by the work that they left flowers and poems. With no intention to show nudity or lead to pornographic interpretation, the neighbors of the exhibition venue considered this work as pornographic and demanded the removal of the piece.

The artist looks back at the massacre of 1965 by re-enacting memories of his father disappearance when he was 8

years old. Apart from the specific event of 1965 that the artist re-enacts, the topics of his works are quite universal: suffering, injustice, and a collective history of violence and crime against humanity. He is one of the artists that deliberately affirms of being against the authorities when it comes to the freedom of speech and opinion in relation to this type of artistic practices of memorizing important political events in the history of Indonesia. An unfortunate outcome has been seen during Ubud Film Festival in Bali, where the movie “The Look of Silence”, a documentary about the massacre event was shut down and the organizers did not resist the oppression. He thinks that hiding the history is more dangerous than restricting it, which is why the artist wishes Indonesians to understand and be aware of their own history and defend their right to talk about it, with the possible consequences.

Christanto’s works are difficult to digest even for an international audience who hasn’t been that proximate with the event as it would happen in Indonesia. For QUT Art Museum, the artist has created works that brought out the issues in a clearer manner. “It is powerful and slightly uncomfortable,” says Van Ooyen, the curator of the exhibition. “We see an Indonesian soldier with an erect penis and women, victims of sexual violence, bleeding from the genitals. It is unrestrained because of anger, there is a sense of urgency because this violence is still happening to people around the world. It is a shocking and haunting artwork.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/art/2015/11/30/dadang-christantos-blood-relations/14486292002675>

This case presents itself as being very suitable from the point of view of how these extremists work. Bentara Budaya is owned by Kompas Media, one of the largest publishing houses in Indonesia which in this particular case decided to be silent in order to keep ‘harmony’. They did not inform the public that the work was not about pornography, but about the sensitive issue of 1965, and preferred to remove the work from their space, rather than getting in a frontal conversation with the extremist groups, or moreover to educate them on the aesthetic issues of contemporary art. This type of situation shows how the symbolic power which Bourdieu stated, can be so significant in the relations of power, mass media and politics.

The second case created a big fuss and scandal in 2005 during Jakarta Biennale. This case looks further into the influence and effect on religious extremist groups on the practice of contemporary art. Under the theme of Urban/Culture, artists Agus Suwage and Davy Linggar created a joint installation entitled “Pinkswing Park”, which addresses the allegory of urban class elite in an artificial paradise. The work consists of a digitally manipulated image of Adam and Eve naked in the Garden of Eden. The artists have self-censored the works by applying white circles on their genitals, but little did they know about the public uproar created after a group of journalists have visited the venue and

discovered that the characters depicted are the well-known soap opera actor Anjasmara and the famous top model Isabel Yahya. In the center of the room, Davy's works consisted of a modified traditional Indonesian rickshaw in the form of a swing.

During the opening of CP Biennale, more than 200 people of FPI demonstrated in front of the building and asking for the closure of the exhibition. They demanded prosecution for the artists, and the police mentioned the artists will face five years of jail for producing pornography. As for the previous case, the organizers did not fight against the Islamic front but accepted the situation as it is in order to not create more conflict. As Carla Bianpoen wrote for Jakarta Post in 2005, there was a sort of disappointment coming from the artists against Jim Supangkat, the well-known curator who did not stand up for the artists and the artworks, but on the contrary mentioned that CP Biennale might be the last one. Among his reasons for not fighting against the FPI is to protect the Bank building where the biennale was held, as well to protect the works by the local and international artists.

In comparison with the previous case, the 'Pinkswing Park' event lead us to another problem Indonesian society is facing, encountered in the influence and power of media. While in the first case the Islamic fundamentalists have discovered the works by mistake and labeled them as pornographic, in the second case is the media's lack of art education and literacy to understand and write in a

neutral or critical way about the artist's works. Instead, media has excessively focused the attention to the nudity and the drama around the characters, fact that has attracted the attention of FPI (Islamic Defenders Front). The group insisted on the removal of the works, and have reported the artists and the exhibition committee to police under the motion of religious blasphemy.

### **CONCLUSION: The Effects of Islamic Interventions on the Three Levels of Artistic Practice**

The two mentioned cases show how the nation ideologies represented by the Islamic force in the mass media and in the politics influence both the art world and the individual artistic practices. By taking advantage of the power relations with the state through the Prevention of Blasphemy law and the presence of the Ministry of Religion Affairs and Religious Court Act, religious extremists have decentralized the power and started acting on the small and large scale events that would intentionally or unintentionally affect the moral values of their own beliefs.

Apart from the legal aspect of it, there exists several paradoxes in the relation between the 'new enemies' and the state. To mention only a few, these type of incidents question the notion of democratic practices, as well the symbolic violence encountered in both cases. The lack of justification and legal endeavor from the organizing parties show the power of these groups on instigating fear and negligence on the sensitive issue at stake.

Moreover, it shows that contemporary art and the art world formed around the global practices and aesthetics are not deprived by the local communities and groups who censor and restrict freedom of expression in arts, although these occasional interventions do not impact the growth of the art scene generally, the country seeing a development in the contemporary art practices with the proliferation of the art fairs, biennials in several cities across the archipelago, as well as the circulation of artworks in the art market.

The consequences of such events have both visible and covered effects on the individual level of artistic practice by not risking to play with sensitive issues that could instigate the religious fundamentalists, as well effects on the cultural policy level and the way the art world is formed nationally. Without a constant endeavor to educate, popularize, or argue for, contemporary artistic practices in Indonesia would remain merely a target for the religious groups that could feed their power without even reaching a compromise.

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