

THE EVENT

INDONESIA'S TIME

THE ISLAND NATION STEPS ONTO THE ART WORLD STAGE
WITH AN ARSENAL PAVILION AT THIS YEAR'S VENICE BIENNALE

BY CARLA BIANPOEN





In Sanskrit, *sakti* refers to the primordial cosmic energy and the personification of divine, feminine creative energy, as well as indicating change and liberation. Of Hindu origin, in Indonesia the concept of *sakti* was quickly integrated into local cosmology, becoming associated with such mythical figures as the rice goddess Dewi Sri and the South Sea Queen, and with certain objects like the *keris* (dagger). Given Indonesia's 700 living languages, the concept of *sakti* can be denoted by other words, but the meaning is almost always the same: a strong creative energy, divine and indestructible, that contains the capacity for achievement beyond mere human ability. As energy, it can be understood as a foundational creative principle.

At the 2013 Venice Biennale, "Sakti" is the theme of the Indonesian National Pavilion.

This year's Biennale, which opens June 1, is not the first to include Indonesian participation. In 1954, the Indonesian artist Affandi was invited to exhibit his work at the Biennale. He was followed almost half a century later by Heri Dono in 2003. That year, Indonesia planted its flag in the Palazzo Malipiero with the first Indonesian pavilion, curated by Amir Sidharta, under the theme of "Paradise Lost: Mourning the World." The country again participated in 2005, with a pavilion at the Telecom Italy Future Center.

Now, for its official appearance at the Biennale after an absence of several years, the Indonesia National Pavilion is moving to 500 square meters of the Arsenale. It is a graduation of sorts, reflected in the ambitious scope inherent in the theme of "Sakti."

In preparing for this year's Biennale, the challenge has been to discover how to draw on the principles of *sakti* while illuminating the present in a contemporary artistic language. Curatorially, we suggested that the artists should be able to explore individual aesthetics, and to consider aspects of history, and the social and pluralistic aspects of the local culture, in a global context. In short, the works should reflect an alternative art practice and articulate a new cultural presence.

The artistic selection team included curators Carla Bianpoen and Rifky Effendy, project initiator and producer Restu Imansari, and Commissioner Adji Damais. Selecting the artists was no easy task, and a long period of deliberation was required. From a list of about 25 names, the team decided on Albert Yonathan Setyawan, Eko Nugroho, Entang Wiharso, Sri Astari (Rasjid), and Titarubi.

Here is a brief introduction to the five artists whose work will represent Indonesia at the 55th Venice Biennale.

◀ **ALBERT YONATHAN SETYAWAN** (b. 1983) was, at the time of his selection, in the final stage of his MFA studies at the Visual Arts Department of the Bandung Institute of Technology. But his inquiries into the relationship between the human being and the natural world, expressed in geometric configurations of spiritually imbued ceramic objects, are well known. Currently pursuing further ceramic art studies in Japan, Setyawan's work for the Indonesian pavilion will consist of a labyrinth made of thousands of ceramic objects. The form of each object is inspired by various prayer houses, including the church, the mosque, and the temple. While personally preferring to follow the spirituality emanating from religions rather than their institutional frameworks, Setyawan's work reflects the tolerance that is embedded in traditional Indonesian culture and manifest in the many hybrid forms that have absorbed foreign elements. When problems arise, the artist's interactive labyrinth—with just one way to enter and exit—suggests that problem-solving should begin with the self.

Installation view of Albert Yonathan's *Labyrinth*, 2012, presented this past August in "Sacred Veranda," the artist's solo show at Galeri Soemardja, Bandung.

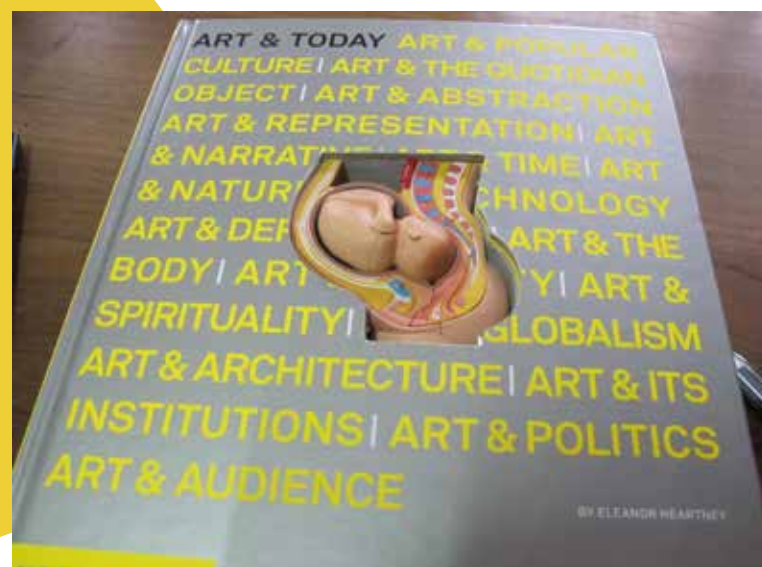
► **EKO NUGROHO** (b. 1977) is relatively well known, having participated in such exhibitions as the Lyon Biennale and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. Nugroho has a preference for collaborating with local communities whose contributions, such as embroidery and machine sewing, have added a special accent to his works of fantasy and folly. For the Indonesian pavilion, however, Nugroho decided to make an almost-realistic presentation of a raft. Made of bamboo and old oil barrels, with iconic figures as passengers, Nugroho's raft metaphorically suggests the Indonesian nation. He says that the success of the Indonesian people in managing to grow and prosper while weathering financial, political, and social storms, as well as natural disasters, is a feat of *sakti*. The flag fluttering from the raft's pole is, of course, made of traditional dyed batik.



◀ **SRI ASTARI (RASJID)** (b. 1959) has been intensely engaged with the re-reading of her Javanese cultural tradition. Her articulation of and critical commentary on traditional symbolism in contemporary life have been expressed in large, iconic, branded bags and motorcycles—symbols of contemporary fetishism and prevailing social insecurity. The traditional *kebaya* blouse-and-skirt ensemble, which had been a recurrent theme of repression in Astari's oeuvre, has lately reappeared as a symbol of protection against global disturbances of the soul, as in her 2011 work *Armors for the Soul*. Re-reading Javanese culture in the spirit of *sakti*, Astari has found that it is in fact inherent in the culture but has been blurred by overwhelming global influences. Yet, she contends, it must be re-activated if we are to survive as a human species. In her 2012 installation *The Wild Woman and the Beast*, Astari further pondered the necessity to reconcile the self with nature and the universe. For the Indonesian pavilion, she presents a traditional Javanese house with its *pendapa*, where visitors usually come and go and influences enter, rub, and possibly clash—but where the spirit of *sakti*, characteristic of the South Sea Queen, will make itself felt in the continuous repositioning of the self and in just decision-making. The *pendapa* is like the soul, Astari says, placing within it nine Bedoyo dancers, symbolizing the strength and power of the South Sea Queen believed to be within everyone.

▼ **ENTANG WIHARSO** (b. 1967) is widely known for his juxtapositions of the archaic and the contemporary, in which inspiration from Javanese myths and legends intertwine with memories of history and personal stories. In his work for the Venice Biennale, Wiharso touches on issues of perception and reality, of what is seen that does not always conform to the actual situation. In his project, a 14-meter-wide bronze, aluminum, and graphite gate separates the visitor from a house and its owners. The gate is covered with reliefs depicting images both real and surreal, showing episodes of love and deceit while juxtaposing elements and icons from his own culture with those of other Asian and Western cultures. The gate, he says, excludes and at the same time welcomes the outsider. Standing outside the gate, one may have ideas of what is inside, based on perceptions gathered from that perspective. Inside the gate, though, another atmosphere prevails, one of sacred admiration mingled with a touch of chaos and an air of struggle. Figures meant to represent the nation's founding fathers and personalities known for having fought for national freedom, democracy, and artistic independence are twisted or made unrecognizable, with only their aura making itself felt.

► **TITARUBI** (b. 1968) is the creator of large sculptures that testify to her artistic skill and contemporary thought. Trained in the ceramic studio of the Bandung Institute of Technology, she soon expanded into mixed-media, large installation works. Earlier, Titarubi had been interested in exploring a range of issues: gender, as in works such as *Bodyscape*, 2005, and *Surrounding David*, 2008; colonial repression, in such works as *Kisah Tanpa Narasi*, 2007; and education (*Bayang2 Maha Kecil*, 2004). For the pavilion at Venice, she is interested in signifying knowledge, science, and education as the foremost important features of civilization. To that end, she is creating an installation of school benches, made of burnt wood to suggest the long duration of learning. (Charcoal, in her childhood the only fuel for cooking, takes a long time to produce.) Thick blank books will be laid on each bench, inviting viewers to fill them with their own stories. Words of wisdom in various languages will be projected on the books, reminding viewers of what is important in life. A 30-meter-wide charcoal drawing of a forest will surround the installation, referencing Indonesia's rich forests, the many fires that periodically consume them, and the burnt wood of the benches.



IN INDONESIA'S 700 LIVING LANGUAGES, THE MEANING OF SAKTI IS ALMOST ALWAYS THE SAME: A STRONG CREATIVE ENERGY, DIVINE AND INDESTRUCTIBLE. IT IS A FOUNDATIONAL CREATIVE PRINCIPLE.

Reviewing the concepts and half-finished works of the Indonesian artists this past November, it was clear that their works are a departure from what is usually presented in contemporary art biennales. This, then, must be the impact of "Sakti," a conceptual frame that, come to think about it, shows a similarity in spirit to Massimiliano Gioni's conceptual theme for the 55th Venice Biennale: the *Palazzo Enciclopedico*, or Encyclopedic Palace—epitomizing what Gioni has called "the dream of universal, all-embracing knowledge" and "the constant challenge of reconciling the self with the universe, the subjective with the collective, the specific with the general, the individual with the culture of her time." It will be interesting to see whether this could indeed signify a new departure for contemporary art. ☐

Carla Bianpoen is the Artistic Director of the Curatorial Board for the Indonesia Pavilion in the 55th Venice Biennale.

Opposite, top: A view of Eko Nugroho's solo exhibition, "Témoins hybride" (Hybrid Witness) at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris this past June; below, Sri Astari (Rasjid), *The Wild Woman and the Beast*, 2012, as seen in a July 2012 group show at ArtJog, Yogyakarta. This page, above: *Wombs of Eros*, 2012, by Titarubi, incorporates a book and three-dimensional model of a pregnant pelvis; left, Entang Wiharso's *Borderless: Floating Island*, 2011, an installation presented in his solo show "Untold Stories" in Berlin in summer 2012.

