

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I.1. Background of the Study

In many Asian countries during recent decades, visual art has contributed in shaping public dialogue in regards to social, educational, and political issues that are parallel to the identity and the country's journey to democracy. Artists would use their work and platform to depict problems found in their respective nations. An example of this could be found in Indonesia during the last few years of the New Order, a term coined for the communist regime during Suharto's rule over the nation from 1966-1998. In a city called Jogjakarta, artists created street art and performances open for the public to enjoy whilst two seminal figures in the Indonesian contemporary art scene, FX Harsono and Dadang Christanto, communicated the oppression suffered by the Indonesian people (Lenzi, 2011).

From the instance above, it may seem that artists at the time had the liberty to express themselves, but that wasn't the case when Suharto still had a strong grip of control over the nation. Any form of event that transgressed limits of tolerated political comments, or have to insulted religion, race, ethnicity, or inter-group relations would have been immediately shut down (Lindsay, 2008). Thus, the government officials created limitations and parameters for the people to abide by; such parameters applied to the realm of art as well.

Art found during that time was rather bland in the sense that there were little to no variety when it came to the message the artist was trying to deliver. The environment that people were in, combined with the control of the government upon all art schools in Indonesia, gave the Suharto regime massive power and the ability to sway what types of works of art can be produced. Thus, the art made during that time was mostly political due to its then political climate; specifically speaking, artists of the time aimed to convey resistance towards the communist administration (Safeh, 2017). In addition, they would use satire in their artworks to express their rebellion and distaste towards the political discourse during that time (Vickers, 2013).

Although Suharto's 32-year rule over Indonesia was the longest to ever be recorded, it eventually came to an end. The years following the fall of the nation's famous relentless dictator, and the end to an authoritarian government, not only changed and freed the nation's politics, but also its art scene (Cook, 2018). Historically, Indonesia has always had a background in evocative artwork; from paintings found adorning the cave walls in Sulawesi, to the paintings with a narrative nature in Bali, to the deep link they have to sculpture since the times in the Iron and Bronze ages, and the persistence of artisans deeply rooted in culture (Sefah, 2017). Due to these foundations, the art world has developed over time into multiple subsets of various genres. Just a few of those genres include *Mooi Indie* (or Beautiful Indies), geometric abstraction, and expressionism. But the world of contemporary art was one of the most evident (Sefah, 2017).

To put it simply, the term “contemporary art” pertains to art—namely, painting, sculpture, installation, video art, performance, and photography—created and produced by artists of this day and age. Artists of the contemporary genre frequently question traditional ideas of how art was originally defined, what it constitutes, and how it is made (Richman-Abdou, 2017). And because of their questioning, they often create discourse—and in certain cases, reject—the art movements and styles of the past, such as Impressionism and Expressionism (Backus, 2013.). Having been rooted in prior artistic phenomena or movements, contemporary art has grown to be one of the most fascinating phases of Indonesian artworks.

In present day, Indonesia’s flourishing contemporary arts is a result of the changes generated by the *Reformasi*—the term coined for the period of transition after the fall of Suharto. The obvious changes being political and artistic freedom. Artists were finally able to fully indulge in their creativity, and enjoy artistic freedom. They created art that showcased their own understanding of the world they lived in, a world that was influenced by their country’s diversity and heritage. This resulted in remarkable collections that expands the viewers’ sense of reality (Putri, 2018), and significant commercial successes in art scenes domestically and globally. A prime example of such success is Nyoman Masriadi, a well-known Indonesian contemporary artist whose artworks have garnered hundreds of thousands of dollars in international auctions by Christie’s and Sotheby’s (Katyal,

2008). Looking into the contemporary art scene from a global angle, according to the 2017 Contemporary Art Market Report:

Unlike other periods, Contemporary Art shows a positive overall return for the past nine months. After falling throughout 2015, the price index for Contemporary Art now shows a +22% increase since January 2016, allowing the segment to maintain a very competitive yield compared with traditional long-term financial assets. Over the last thirty years, the value of Contemporary artworks risen +129% (2017, p. 1).

As seen in the statement above, the global contemporary art scene was flourishing, but the journey for Indonesian artists to receive international recognition, however, was a slow one, due to the scarcity of the country's support regarding art studies. Thus, the artists were producing artworks that were more rooted in culture as opposed to going by the doctrines of the western development of art, which was more eminent at the time. And yet, contemporary Indonesian artwork managed to endure and still be a staple of the community because of the local galleries' efforts and willingness to exhibit work from the genre (Sefah, 2017).

Though there are several galleries open and running in Indonesia, the subject of this research is located in the capital and largest city of Central Java—Semarang. The Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery was first built and established in 1822, and can be found today in the preserved colonial city, *Kota Lama*. It has since been conserved and turned into an art gallery less than two hundred years later by Chris Dharmawan. An avid collector and art philanthropist, he stands by the philosophy that when people, art, culture, and idealism meet in one room, their interaction with one another will create such beauty and splendor.

His reason for building the gallery was for it to act as a means to showcase and introduce to the masses a variety of contemporary artworks from all across Asia, but most especially from Indonesia. And it's latest showcase (during the time of this writing), featuring an Indonesian artist, was an exhibition called, "Empty Signifiers."

I.2. Problem Identification

Not to be confused with an art exhibit, an art exhibition entail a series of artworks that have a specific theme, whereas an exhibit is the opposite, for it pertains to a single piece of art. Furthermore, art exhibitions are where one can see and experience art (Kendzulak, 2018). Art is made to be seen, looked at and appreciated, and that is exactly what people do when they encounter it. Something else individuals do in addition to that, is to attempt to interpret the artwork (Fagan, 2016).

The goal of interpretation is to give out explanations of different kinds in order to forward understanding. In the context of art, it's aim is to apprehend a work of art's values, and likewise to make the best use out of one's understanding and appreciation of said artwork (Goldman, 1998). However, works of art are not the easiest to comprehend and grasp, hence making the act of interpreting them even more difficult. This case is true even for people who claim to be skilled and knowledgeable in the world of art, what more for those who are not overly familiar with the realm (Hospers, 2018). Beckett (2007) encourages individuals to

not feel dismay during times when one does not understand art at all. Explaining further that though prior knowledge in the field of art is helpful, art is not limited only to be experienced by critics and historians.

That being said, an explanation or some form of description provided by the art gallery an individual is visiting can deem to be helpful for the visitor, as it makes the interpretation process much easier for them. There are some times when galleries would provide wall texts as a means to appease visitors of the problem of aesthetic interpretation. However, debates have circled around regarding whether or not wall texts are even needed (Louise, 2013). And those who agree over the notion, believe that when done right, the presence of wall texts in galleries may enhance a visitor's art experience to an intellectual, and even possibly emotional level (Louise, 2013).

Besides wall texts, galleries may provide visitors various ways to decrease their problem in interpreting the art they come in contact with. Such ways include discussions, brochures, or catalogs (Louise, 2015). Whatever way a gallery chooses to go about it, what they are essentially doing is taking away the ability from a visitor to formulate their own interpretation of a work of art, socially constructing a reality wherein said visitor will have no choice but to succumb to the meanings the gallery has formed.

Researches or studies regarding social construction have been found and done, but there are little, if any, studies pertaining to how galleries socially construct the meaning behind an art exhibition, establishing patterns and

definitions that will result in the creation of a shared sense of reality between the gallery and its visitors. Furthermore, in general, minimal research regarding social construction in the world of art has been conducted.

I.3. Problem Statement

How is the meaning behind the art exhibition “Empty Signifiers” socially constructed by Nindityo Adipurnomo and the gallery?

I.4. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to observe and discover how the meaning behind art, specifically an exhibition in this context, is socially constructed.

I.5. Significance of the Study

The investigation and journey to discover how the meaning behind “Empty Signifiers” was socially constructed was meant to fulfil several purposes:

I.5.1. Academic:

- a. To contribute to the findings previously conducted in Indonesia about art and social construction.
- b. To provide new findings and perspective regarding how art galleries affect a visitor’s art experience.

I.5.2. Social:

- a. To gain much awareness about how art galleries affect the way one interprets art.
- b. To show that art isn't just something that looks pleasing for the eyes, and that it certainly is not something useless in society.

