

DECENTRALIZATION DILEMMA

For the last five years Jakarta has been undergoing a major transition. It is undeniable that the megapolis is an important cultural center in Indonesia and has made a significant upgrade in its art

infrastructure. However, despite the spirit of decentralization that has been propagated since the 1998 *Reformasi* and the planned relocation in 2024 of the political capital to Nusantara, a newly developing city in East Kalimantan on Borneo, Jakarta retains its position as the country's nucleus and will uphold its cultural privileges in the coming years.

The transition can be seen in the recent redevelopment of city infrastructure. Since early in 2022—with a budget two- to three-times larger than the other provinces in Java—the Special Capital District of Jakarta government has been revitalizing public facilities, from the expansion of pedestrian walkways to the service extensions on the Transjakarta city bus routes and the rehabilitation of old bus stops. The significant improvements have resulted in more efficient and safer mass transit in Jakarta. However, the main improvements are largely applicable to the city center around the Sudirman, Kuningan, and other nearby areas where multinational business takes place and the middle classes work and gather. The change somehow creates a facade, or a false impression, of a beautiful and well-governed Jakarta to those who live outside it and abroad. The situation is not new to those aware of recent Indonesian democracy, which often deals in “window dressing” politics.

There were also several infrastructural developments in the arts. The most visible is the revamped version of the Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), which opened in June. The new, sophisticated building complex replaced the old one used since its inauguration in 1968 by the Jakarta Arts Council as an important institution for arts in Indonesia. Once again, it proves the centralizing trait in arts production since the New Order. Even after *Reformasi*, no other city can measure up to this achievement of owning the best state-funded cultural site.

As the inaugural exhibition of the TIM gallery facility, “CIPTA! Kapita Selektika Cikini Raya 73” (6/18–7/16) was notable for showing selected Jakarta Arts Council’s archives and art collections under the Fine Arts Committee of Jakarta Arts Council. Curated by Esha Tegar Putra and Ady Nugeraha, the exhibition featured rarely viewed and important works from the

late 1960s to 1980s by prominent Indonesian artists—such as Nashar, Jim Supangkat, and Nunung WS, among others—and also rarely accessed public archives of Jakarta Arts Council such as event posters and audio recordings of important seminars and speeches by prominent public intellectuals in that period. The exhibition hinted at a healthy cultural organization in Jakarta under legendary governor Ali Sadikin’s patronage, illustrating that even during the repressive New Order administration Jakarta enjoyed distinct privileges in arts development as the apparent anomaly in a state patron-client cultural policy. The Jakarta Arts Council at the time organized important exhibitions, performances, discussions,

and screenings by the Indonesia New Art Movement, dramatist and poet WS Rendra, the Teater Koma group, art critic Sanento Yuliman, and public intellectual Abdurrahman Wahid, among



The Ismail Marzuki Park Plaza in Jakarta with a mural depicting the late painter Raden Saleh. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



Installation view of (left to right) JEIHAN’s *Dalang*, 1979, oil on canvas, 140 × 140 cm, and DEDE ERI SUPRIA’s *Potret Trisno Sumardjo*, oil on canvas, 1979, 146 × 181.5 cm, at “CIPTA! Kapita Selektika Cikini Raya 33,” Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, 2022. Photo by Eva Tobing. Courtesy Jakarta Arts Council.

others, who staged avant-gardist cultural expressions as well as dissenting and critical voices in the New Order's otherwise paternalistic and depoliticized cultural sphere.

As a center, Jakarta witnessed many exciting and significant exhibitions. One of them was Mella Jaarsma's retrospective curated by Alia Swastika, "Performing Artifacts: Objects in Questions" (10/19–11/20) at ROH Projects, with selected works from 2011 to 2021 as well as new ones. Hailing from her thorough and comprehensive involvement with Indonesia's contemporary and traditional cultures, Jaarsma's body of works here mostly appeared in the form of costumes designed in odd yet playful configurations to challenge our assumed understandings of daily objects or museum artifacts. Jaarsma is an exemplar who pursues anthropological and ethnographic research in art making that results in assemblages that see cultural objects with a non-orientalist lens. She is always aware of local historical and social context, and, as a result, avoids putting them in a fixed classification to make them easy to comprehend.

Returning again to infrastructure: Jakarta is an arena where cultural policy is discussed through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, in collaboration with civil advocacy. The concrete implementation of these programs includes The Cultural Endowment Fund implemented through Cultural Facilitation in 2020 and was transformed into the Indonesian Fund in early 2022. The objective is to fund artists and art practitioners in a decentralized manner. Every artist and cultural practitioner can apply for funding to support arts production by open submission. With this system, the big state-funded art events are supposed to no longer be concentrated in Jakarta or Java. The policy confronts the idea of always bringing regional artists to perform or exhibit their works in the center as tokenistic representation. Instead, the cultural practitioners outside Java should gain as much privilege as those in Jakarta and other regional centers to generate satisfactory arts productions for their local public.

Ade Darmawan, the ruangrupa director, uttered a similar critique towards centralized art production in the Jakarta Arts Council's Annual Cultural Speech on November 10. Darmawan is said to be the first visual artist presenter since the annual event's establishment in 1989. Usually, the Annual Cultural Speech invites public intellectuals or scholars to discuss national problems and challenges through cultural perspectives. Darmawan raised the issue that there is a need to encourage more "collaboration between locales—not a collaboration between locales and the center." It resonates too with the implementation of the *lumbung* concept in documenta fifteen, in which ruangrupa faced enormous challenges in installing a bottom-up infrastructure and system of equally shared resources within the existing centralized and Eurocentric organizational tradition of Documenta.

Jakarta, as well as Indonesia at large, still requires more self-reflection regarding its position in the global art scene. Decolonization and decentralization, increasingly promoted by Indonesian art stakeholders in recent years, must be self-internalized continuously.

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Installation view of **MELLA JAARSM**A's, *Animals Have No Religion - Indra*, 2012, costumes, teak wood, deer feet and wallpaper, dimensions variable, at "Performing Artifacts: Objects in Question," ROH Projects, Jakarta, 2022. Courtesy the artist and ROH.

MELLA JAARSMA, *If I*, 2021, acrylic, wood and barkcloth, dimensions, 90 x 205 cm. Courtesy the artist

