


Individual liaison: Gregorius Sidharta, tradition, and modernity

Arbitrase individual: Gregorius Sidharta dalam dikotomi tradisi dan modernitas

Ganjar Gumilar^a * 

^a Universitas Telkom, Indonesia, Jl. Telekomunikasi terusan buah batu indonesia 40257, Bandung, Indonesia

Submitted: April 5, 2022; Accepted: August 15, 2022; Published: August 25, 2022

KEYWORDS

Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, tradition, modernity, modern Indonesian art, contemporary art

ABSTRACT

Understanding the dialogic relation between tradition and modernity in our current cultural dynamic remains an ‘incomplete project’ that requires careful examination. Approaching and thoroughly interpreting both roles in our society, mainly in how they influenced our current paradigm of culture, continue to pose risks and challenges. This article will explore the works of Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, a renowned maestro of Bandung modern art, whose conversational practice proposes a particular means of harmonizing these antagonistic tensions and various derivatives issues that might later follow. By using art criticism as its primary modalities while simultaneously cross-referencing both modern and contemporary aesthetic paradigms, this article will demonstrate how Sidharta’s inclusive and deliberate approach might provide a dialogic site for various antagonist polarities—mainly tradition and modernity—to coexist within a democratic, horizontal, and productive axis. His audacity in contemplating inward and resorting to his idiosyncrasy would also be highlighted for its contributive nature as the pretext of his attempt to reconcile, resolve, and synthesize the long-desirable harmony between tradition and modernity. These gestures have undergone a consistent, gradual process of internal reflection that touched upon his personal experiences, particularly his encounter with multitudes of cultural values, perspectives, and paradigms that each proposes their significance.

KATA KUNCI

Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, tradisi, modernitas, seni rupa modern Indonesia, seni rupa kontemporer

ABSTRAK

Tradisi dan modernitas dalam kemutakhiran saat ini masih menyimpan banyak selubung pemaknaan yang menunggu untuk dibuka, dialami, dan dimaknai kembali. Mendekati dan memahami keduanya dengan adil dan menyeluruh adalah upaya yang beresiko. Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, salah satu maestro patung modern Bandung, menunjukkan cara yang khas dalam menengahi beragam tegangan beserta ragam derivasi konflik yang dimunculkan. Dengan berpijak pada metode kritik seni terhadap pemilihan karya Sidharta untuk kemudian diperiksa secara menyilang baik terhadap konsep-konsep estetika modern serta kontemporer, artikel ini akan menunjukkan bagaimana Sidharta menemukan kesetimbangan untuk menghidupkan keduanya dengan berpijak pada idiosinkrasi diri untuk mempertemukan, mendamaikan, menengahi, serta melakukan arbitrase pada dikotomi tradisi dan modernitas. Keseimbangan ini ditemukannya melalui perkembangan pemaknaan diri yang secara gradual bersentuhan dengan beragam perbedaan nilai, paradigma, dan ideologi yang membawa keutamannya masing-masing.

How to cite this article:

Gumilar, G. (2022). Individual liaison: Gregorius Sidharta, tradition, and modernity. *Bahasa dan Seni: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Pengajarannya*, 50(2), 176–195. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17977/um015v50i22022p176>

* Corresponding author name: ganjargumilar@telkomuniversity.ac.id

Introduction

Tradition and Contemporaneity

Living through and within traditional values and conserving them in the East contemporary living such as us Indonesians demands continuous search and contemplation. Ideas such as ‘living both modern values and local wisdom harmoniously’ today would sound like nothing more than empty suggestions void of meaning. The customarily following advice such as ‘conserving tradition as our core values while simultaneously embracing modern culture followed with careful examination and recontextualization’ points toward almost nothing. One cannot help to ask: ‘What is the filter?’, ‘Which ‘tradition’ do we use as our primary reference?’ or ‘How would the negotiation—adopting and rejecting specific modern clauses or premises—take place?’ ‘Is there any solid and workable formula we can use as our frame of reference?’ Though this might sound like mere rhetorical inquiries in which almost no clear solution can be offered, it does not mean that trivial jargon(s) should be proposed impulsively. Without careful investigation, reinterpretation, and considerations, our longing for harmony would only exist in our utopian dreams and delusions if not falling into false ‘syncretization’ and ‘hybridization’ that are not only superficial but also beyond profane.

Within *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, a large-scale exhibition organized by Asia Society in 1996, the show curator Poshyananda (1996), in his introduction, stated that “... the tension between traditional and modern cultures (and) the seductive diffusion of global consumer culture ... has radically transformed conventional Asian societies and their art.” The word ‘transformations’ here conveys a neutral connotation, as the word itself might suggest a ‘double-coding’ of signifying rapid progress—as economic progress within several Asian nations—or exposing its negative consequences—of conservatism, power abuse, and discrimination—. Rather conveniently, (Munroe, 1997), in her review, seemed to highlight the latter, stating the show addressed:

“... (a) more immediate issues of cultural survival in the face of domestic tragedies including religious warfare, bloody civilian uprisings, the economic and sexual oppression of women in patriarchal societies, and the loss of traditional culture to nationalistic ideologies or capitalist consumption. ... (It) addresses critically the tumultuous complexities and socioeconomic disparities of contemporary Asia.” (p. 81)

Aside from the inclusion of Jim Supangkat as the co-curator and Dadang Christanto as one of the contributing artists, how would—in a more current context—the framework of that specific show still echo Indonesia's current sociodynamics? If I am allowed to suggest, perhaps the remaining traces of religious conflicts and the polemic of traditional culture provided a delicate thread of relevance. As today's Indonesia is increasingly maneuvered toward conservatism under religious fundamentalism (Lanti & Dermawan, 2020; Pribadi, 2021) and has been ‘slightly’ developing under the influence of ‘traditional nationalism’ (Fakih, 2012), the hope for manifesting the pluralist and modern national ideology would remain a quixotic quest. Although admittedly, religion and tradition are two separate entities, their shared status of being ‘premodern’ might highlight the tension I previously portrayed.

Perhaps there would be no overarching principles that would within absolute certainty address the tension of tradition vis-à-vis modernity. Maybe the possible existence of these harmonies extends beyond our 'mere' human understanding that has been situated within the operatives of 'logical' language. However, let us not despair into stagnation, as reliving traditional values in our contemporary routine might be worked within an attentive approach open to myriads of possible interpretations. Be that as it may, this article will propose an exemplar of how one might live both traditional and modern values simultaneously, at least at the individual level, through a mindful examination of a specific corpus of modern artmaking from an artist to inspire further our approach and insights toward the perpetual tension of tradition and modernity, as for the context of the artist in review, of Javanese tradition and Indonesian modernity.

My point of departure is Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo, an Indonesian sculptor whose contribution to modern Indonesian art is no less than significant, who, as of the writing of this article, was recently included in *Pusaka Seni Rupa: Seni Patung Indonesia Modern* (Hapsoro & Wiyanto, 2020). Throughout his life, Sidharta has been filling various roles. His main contribution as an artist is complemented by other roles of educator, organizer, art manager (Anindita, 2020), art collective leader, and even exhibition-maker. He was also the first figure who introduced the term 'contemporary' to Indonesian art communities (Kusmara, 2011). In harmonizing the tension between traditional values and modern logic, Sidharta's works often display his personal and idiosyncratic vision. He embraced multiculturalism and manifested the importance of pluralism profoundly. His inclusive nature did not stem from the empty-yet-ecstatic celebration of freedom of pluralism that is prone to be reduced to superficial trivialities. Instead, his visions aimed toward a different picture, recontextualizing tradition through continual dialogue with the self and the psyche. By inclining to his interpretation, Sidharta also embraced his individualism, not in the sense of 'modern' individuality of 'artists as geniuses, but rather in its contemporary context. Besides being influenced by metanarrative, Sidharta's individualism was quite distinctive. He can be very deliberate in resorting to his personal experience, employing 'self-referentiality'—in its literal definition of referring to oneself—that might operate within the axis of postmodern mini-narratives, an artistic sensibility that is—curiously—still relevant in the recent debate of contemporary culture. Despite being an essential part, Sidharta's individualism didn't let him be egocentric and biased; on the contrary, his insight was honest, reflective, and receptive. This article will suggest that Sidharta's inclusive nature provides a version of harmony that illustrates how ideal coexistence between the polarities of modernism and tradition can be negotiated beyond its typical resolutions and suggestions.

Biographical Notes of Gregorius Sidharta Soegijo

Sidharta's particular qualities, mainly his fondness for multiculturalism, resulted from a gradual process of reliving and renegotiating tensions and differences. Polarities, dichotomies, and oppositions were not unfamiliar to him, as he was continually exposed to them throughout his life. In his formative years, he grew up living in a family that was both religiously Catholic and traditionally Javanese (Supangkat, 1995), learning the beauty of being tolerant in his early life. In terms of education, he learned the 'tension' from social realism in Yogya and modernist formalism in the Netherlands (Supangkat, 1995) and later chose to refer to tradition as his anchor as he matured in

his productive years in Bandung. He also lived and experienced the different artistic environments and ideologies between the ‘*Mazhab Bandung*’ and ‘*Mazhab Yogya*’ dialogue throughout his career as an artist and educator. All of these experiences combined encourage Sidharta to formulate his insight of coexistence and harmony that might operate within the intersection of tradition and modernity, something that he would subtly promote and propose as a reference to how nationalism—or Indonesian values, with his own word—something can be exercised within the art and culture.

Young Sidharta was blessed by tremendous support and encouragement from his father, Bernardinus Soegijo, upon knowing his interest in art and his vision to be an artist. Within Supangkat's (1995) account, his father introduced and sponsored him to learn about painting at *Sanggar Pelukis Rakyat* (The People Painter Guild), where he experienced several approaches to implementing the social function of art from Trubus and Hendra Gunawan. Further explaining, Supangkat (1995) stated that despite his fascination with his mentors, Sidharta felt that their approaches were not completely aligned with his vision, which he also shared with his father. Nevertheless, he continued his early art education there even after SPR developed into a formal academic institution, as *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia* (National Art Academy of Indonesia) in 1950 and today's *Institut Seni Indonesia* (Indonesia Art Institute) – Yogyakarta. Only one year after receiving his formal education in ASRI, and under the supervision of his father, Sidharta applied to Jan Van Eyck Academie in the Netherland and continued his education there from 1953 to 1956, where he learned the modern paradigm of painting and started to show his interest in cubism's deformation, a principle that later shaped his formalist and abstract gestures (Supangkat, 1995).

After finishing his study and returning to Yogyakarta, Sidharta held an exhibition in 1957 to expose his renewed interest. However, he received polarizing comments from his peers, as not many showed their appreciation. Within his notes, Supangkat (1995) stated that these dismissive comments were indicative of how Sidharta was misunderstood by Yogyakarta's critics and art communities. Further elaborating, Supangkat reiterated W. S. Rendra's comments on Sidharta's show, as shown in a media review, ‘*Kuntum Pengharapan Mekar di Solo*’ (1958), for exhibiting ‘merely’ aesthetic objects that imbued itself only with superficial quality, asserting him as exposing the Westernized version of art that was deprived of cultural significance relevant to Eastern values, and concerned about how this approach might mislead Indonesian artists to only be satisfied with shallow experimentation and ‘style-play’ (*main-main Gaya*). This might indicate that during early independence, there existed a misleading sentiment regarding formalism to only display beauty and failing to represent the harsh reality that the people endured.

These negative sentiments were only the beginning, as later they evolved to become overwhelmingly oppressive with dire consequences. As further noted by Supangkat (1995), Sidharta was exiled and isolated by the art communities nearing the early half of the 60s due to his formalist approach to artmaking. Supangkat (1995) saw that during those times, the growing influence of LEKRA - *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (The People Cultural Center) within Yogyakarta art circles only approved arts that aligned with their political and ‘instrumental’ ideology of social realism. LEKRA was overly skeptical, as Supangkat (1995) further said that they can be extensive “...aggressive

and oppressive towards any disagreement” of anyone who disproved their ideology. Echoing further, Sudjoko (1992) in his essay *Menuju Nirada*, stated that these consequences can be urgently dire, as he implied that LEKRA might use violence while exercising their power. In hindsight, these distastes and negative attitudes toward abstract and formalism for their relation to the West were somehow paradoxical since promoting social realism itself is inherently manifesting ‘western influence’ (Holt, 1967; Sudjoko, 1992), albeit being distracted—or perhaps disillusioned—under the spirit of nationalism manifested as ‘anti-West’ sentiment and ‘anti-academism’ (Supangkat, 1995).

Unfortunately for Sidharta, and being aggravated by his choice of advocating and contributing to the ‘*Manifes Kebudayaan*’ (The Cultural Manifesto) movement, his position within the Yogya art communities was undeniably ‘problematic,’ to say the least. The communities ‘isolated’ and alienated him within their circles. He was pushed to resign his position as lecturer in ASRI and was deprived of any exhibition and commissioned opportunities after (Supangkat, 1995). These negative sentiments and accusations and all the following consequences cornered Sidharta into financial problems. In these challenging times, Sidharta pushed himself for options and alternatives on how to survive both financially and ‘aesthetically.’ Fortunately, his previous affiliation with *Manifes Kebudayaan* offered him a slight hope for shelter and protection.

Later in the mid-60s, Sidharta received an invitation from But Muchtar to assist him in managing and directing the sculpture department at *Institut Teknologi Bandung* (Bandung Institute of Technology). As he waited for the political turbulence of the transitional phase from the ‘Old’ to the ‘New’ Order resided (Anindita, 2020), Sidharta fulfilled this invitation and eventually moved to Bandung. As Holt (1967) stated, from the early days of Indonesia's independence, Bandung has been the ‘bridge’ to West modernism in knowledge production, cultural atmosphere, and infrastructure development; qualities and characters that prompted him later to resettle there definitively.

The political shift from socialism in the ‘Old’ to quasi-liberalism of the New Order of Indonesia gained *Mazhab Bandung* prominent recognition within the Indonesian art scene, including public officials. Quite ironically, these approvals were, again, somewhat ‘instrumental’ rather than cultural, for formalism might be the proper canal for displaying ‘national progress and development’ that would strengthen public approval and reasonably ‘impotence’ in igniting social unrest and revolution (Gumilar, 2018), as the shift itself generally prompted by political agenda and economic motives rather than confirmation of modernist values. Stating otherwise would be an overstatement since freedom of speech and protection of individual voices and expression were suppressed as censorship and formal discursive control intensified indefinitely, exercised by militarist, oppressive, and authoritative governance. Later, this dynamic is known as ‘*Depolitisasi Seni Rupa Indonesia*’ (Depoliticization of Indonesian Art), a period in which the art practice was seen as reaching a point of stagnation. On a side note, Supangkat (2001) stated that the response given by the younger generation to this point of stagnation was manifested—initially—within the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (The New Art Movement), which might later serve as a pretext for the initial development of Indonesia’s contemporary art.

Despite enjoying the conducive atmosphere in Bandung, Sidharta didn't cease his lifelong question about reinventing Indonesian values. He continued to explore alternating formulas for the ideal harmony between traditional values and modern culture, even when his effort might trigger disapproval from others, as he experienced previously in Yogyakarta. He embarked on a new journey of exploring and recontextualizing traditional values within his method and the modern practice of culture, as a statement of being critical of modernism. This critical attitude began to develop in the second half of the 1970s, as he 'completed' his mission of erecting the formal education of modern sculpture. Within this period, Sidharta started to develop his inclusive nature, provided by his involvement within DECENTA (Design Center Association), an artist collective that functioned as a creative hub and pool of resources for the *Mazhab Bandung* exponents, for their approach of being open and accommodative toward each individual's interests. In addition, DECENTA also functioned as a design studio that accommodated the production of public art projects commissioned by the government, adding other incentives for its members. For Anindita (2020), his involvement within the collective and design center was seen as one of the most productive years for Sidharta. During these moments, Sidharta started to gain confidence in exploring his idiosyncratic gestures and self-referentiality, aiming to find his particular styles while simultaneously being reflexive to his surroundings. As also indicative in one of his statements: "Is the modern art the sole reference for us (contemporary) Indonesian artists? (I beg to differ.) I reject hegemony, I wish to explore alternatives, I wish to find Indonesian values." (Supangkat, 1995).

After DECENTA, in 1978 (Supangkat, 1995), Sidharta began to work independently as an artist, reaching his maturity and setting a firm position and statement. The experience and networks that he had gradually accumulated over the years granted him the flexibility to work individually and the liberty of being critical and deliberate. He often envisioned further into the future while not infrequently revisiting past issues and former questions. His firm beliefs and statements post-DECENTA period were reflected in another of his solo show, *'Dari Dini ke Kini'*, curated by Supangkat dan Yuliman (1982), to publicize his latest insights, approaches, and attitude, besides exposing his journey as an artist (Supangkat, 1995). Not only that this exhibition represents his evolutionary practice within a retrospective framework, but his recent works also expose his 'democratic,' all-embracing, and inclusive nature, indicative of his 'proto-contemporary' attitude that embraces pluralism, a point that was symptomatic of his departure from the modernist approach.

Sidharta's initial concerns about contemporary art developed within an inquiry of reinventing Indonesian art and culture. His quests for Indonesian values and his critical attitude toward modernism (without diminishing its prospects) often prompted him to refer to local wisdom and tradition as an alternate point of view. Within this context, this article deemed Sidharta's efforts were essentially an attempt to liaise between the value of the 'modern West' and the 'traditional East.' To him, Indonesian identity lay in a delicate counterbalance between the first and the latter that avoid extremism such as becoming anti-modern and solely living under tradition within stagnation or blindly adopting the modern principles and forsaking tradition altogether. For Sidharta, Indonesian identity lay within the superposition of both paradigms, as reflected continually in his practice.

Method

Investigating artistic intentions that are often personal and cultural prompted this article to use a qualitative strategy to expose Sidharta's versions of 'Indonesian values.' As for the primary data, several selections of works that are consequential to the dynamic of his practice would also be chosen. Initial reading using art criticism, followed by diachronic analysis within a specific timeline, would also be performed. As for the conclusion, further interpretation will also be served through cross-references to modern and contemporary aesthetic glossaries. While not claiming to use psychological analysis and ethnographic inquiries, this article attempts to moderately contextualize his works within his personal history exposed to cultural relativism and socio-political dynamics, mainly in explaining the background of his reasoning. Aside from this primary data, additional sources such as academic papers, literature, and media reviews will be referred to accordingly.

In terms of art criticism, this article primarily utilizes Barret's critic mode (Barrett, 2004) rather than Feldman's method (Feldman, 1967). Even though Sidharta was often deemed a modernist, thus recommending the use of the latter, his multicultural gestures and fondness for pluralism might suggest otherwise. Also, Barret's approach is considered relevant in this context, for it might also be open to its author's alignment and opinion. Regarding theoretical underpinnings, the decision to refer simultaneously to both modern and contemporary aesthetics, albeit it presents a challenge, is considered to be necessary. Modern art that champions the spirit of avant-gardism while detaching itself from the public and its content and then arriving into abstract forms as it reaches the absolutes (Greenberg, 1971) should almost be diametrically opposed to contemporary art with its accommodative nature of embracing diversity, freedom, connectivity, and sociocultural issues (Smith, 2011), which often manifested as a form of representation (Wallis et al., 1984). However, for Sidharta, this tension of differing paradigms seems to be treated almost 'democratically' as an attempt to widen his horizon of understanding by extracting and implementing the virtues proposed from both principles. In addition, referring to recently available theoretical tools may allow the article to expose Sidharta's attitude of being 'proto-contemporary.'

In terms of specific concepts of artistic idioms, this article would also highlight Sidharta's idiosyncrasy—or self-referentiality—within the postmodern's mini-narrative, an idea initially introduced by Lyotard (1979). As modernism's grand narrative is considered obsolete in the current cultural landscape, Lyotard (1979) saw the postmodern's skepticism or "... incredulity toward metanarrative" (p. xxiii), enabling these *petit recits* to function as relevant modes in explaining social transformation and political problems. Further, it also suggests the prominence of context as the foundation of 'truth', as extensively promoted in the recent cultural debate. This article applies the relevance of the mini-narrative to the 'extreme', where it exploits the probability of its conceptual functioning at the individual and idiosyncratic levels. As Sidharta continued to refer to his intent, the previous aim of highlighting his 'proto-contemporary' sensibilities within this conceptual framework might provide this article with other insights.

Results and Discussion

The analysis presented here will be divided into three subsections, each focusing on particular shifts in Sidharta's artistic gestures and intentions that were affected by his internal dialogue and external factors. The reader might find this division to be somewhat chronological, written in such a way to illustrate the gradual development of Sidharta's practice from being critical of various conventions until he managed to flexibly interpret and manifest his version of 'Indonesian values' within his piece.

Transversing Boundaries and Convention

The first part of this section will discuss *Kristus Hati Suci* (1958) and *Tiang Berulang* (1973), a series of Sidharta's sculptures that indicate his deliberate interpretation of cultural values and audacity in manifesting his artistic gesture, a significant step in his search for his idiosyncratic version of art and culture. For context, each work was 'prompted' by significant life-changing events in his life. *Kristus Hati Suci* was commissioned one year after his homecoming from his study in the Jan Van Eyck Academi in the Netherland, and *Tiang Berulang* was produced after his 'escape' from Yogyakarta to Bandung in the second half of the 1960s. The immediate influence represented in his work should indicate the artist's sincere and intimate relationship with his creative process.

Within Supangkat's (1995) and Anindita's (2020) accounts, *Kristus Hati Suci* (the Holy Christ) is the first sculpture produced by Sidharta (Figure 1). Coincidentally, this sculpture is also the first commissioned work he ever received, created in 1958 after being approached by a religious leader who led a small church in the Kalasan region, Yogyakarta. We may already see his initial attitude of being critical of *pakem* or convention—in this context, religious iconography—as displayed within his deliberate choice of portraying Jesus Christ in this sculpture. Other than depicting the westernized, 'Rennaissance' version of Jesus that at that time was familiar to the church community: a fine European white male with a beard that expresses caring, affection, and piety (Supangkat, 1995), Sidharta chose to incarnate Jesus within a 'Javanese body.' Jesus was portrayed as a short-haired man, decorated with an iconic Javanese mustache without a beard, a slightly slouched and thin muscular body that showed years of hard work and hardships. Its face rendered a cold, assertive, and stiff expression. In the area of its chest, there appears to be a depiction of a glowing heart, carved roughly. These interpretations were far from the 'conventional' portraiture of Jesus, both biblically or within Western culture. Predictably, this unconventional depiction would later invite clamor from the church community (Supangkat, 1995).



Figure 1: *Kristus Hati Suci*, 1958. (Source: Anindita, 2020)

To Supangkat (1995), this unconventional depiction of Christ resembles the iconic ‘*Ksatria Jawa*’ portraiture, the Javanese version of knights that were brave, courageous, patriotic, and loyal to his people. This, in a way, can be seen as Sidharta’s attempt to integrate the ‘adopted’ religious values into local communities and mitigate the gap between the two by creating a hybrid framework using a somewhat familiar traditional—or local—symbol to its people. I suggest seeing this slightly provocative and conscious move in decidedly shifting Jesus’ representation as a continuous critical reflection toward finding alternate versions of values and reluctance to live under false hegemony and employ no ‘iconoclastic’ intent. This sculpture delivered his suggestion for approaching and practicing religion within his community, the Javanese society. The visual metaphors propose thoughtful meanings: the importance of firmness and determination in living a good life (as depicted in the body and gestures) yet with an open and nurturing heart that radiated grace upon others (within the ‘glowing’ heart at the chest).

Another point that might be explored here is Sidharta’s choice of using figurative representation and not exposing his newfound interest in abstract and formalism, ‘disregarding’ modernist distaste for “...subject matter and content that should be avoided like a plague” (Greenberg, 1971), despite his recent study in Jan Van Eyck. Other than following his interest, he chose to be accommodative to the public’s needs while simultaneously exercising his critical thinking, manifested clearly in his reference to the *Ksatria* figure. This was also indicative of his integrity and self-awareness of the artists’ contribution to their society. Interestingly, this artistic integrity merged accordingly within his self-referentiality, as Anindita (2020) recounts that the previously mentioned *Ksatria* figure was in actuality inspired by Sidharta’s father and grandfather features. Lastly, *Kristus Hati Suci* is not only expressing his idealized version of practicing religion within a specific local context but also indicating his commitment and determination of being critical, without shying away from resorting to one’s self-referentiality.

For the second sculpture, *Tiang Berulang* (1973), Sidharta's criticism of convention—in this context, medium specificity—is also apparent. In the modern art paradigms, medium specificity, a key concept championed by Greenberg in his seminal essay *Modernist Painting* (1982), proposes "... the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium" (Greenberg, 1982, p. 5). Within this notion, the process of modern artmaking was framed by the specific qualities—if not limitations—of the medium itself, such as the flatness of canvasses or the properties of the pigment. This framework was believed to conserve art's purity, thus diligently defended by its proponent as it reflects the spirit of avant-gardism. As stated previously, despite having an interest in formalism, particularly in the 70s, Sidharta never stopped posing deliberate questions and freely exploring his venture by creating hybrid mediums and artistic idioms, as expressed in *Tiang Berulang* (Repeated Pillars), particularly within the 1973 version.



Figure 2: *Tiang Berulang*, 1971. (Source: Indonesia Visual Art Archive - IVAA)

In essence, *Tiang Berulang* (1973) is a sculpture-painting hybrid that 'represents' a juxtaposition of context and aesthetic qualities. It appears to be standing vertically from 4 parallel pillars composed in symmetrical configuration but manages to retain its organic look. This impression can be seen from the choice of material used, namely wood, which is processed to maintain its structural integrity without appearing rigid or stiff. A pair of supporting pillars are anchored to the ground, while the other pair forms into wings hanging on the outer edges. He denied the natural texture of the organic materials he used by layering and 'painting' them with acrylic pigments. Sidharta only left the rudimentary shape of the wood he used here, for other natural qualities, specifically textures, seemed to have been deliberately omitted. The outer surface of his sculpture was worked with acrylic pigment and formed a particular kind of ornamentation. The color choices were also quite interesting: jet black, gold, deep red, and lacquer brown, emphasizing the artificialities of the work. Nevertheless, again, Sidharta presented paradoxes and tensions: artificial construction with natural organic forms, structure with decoration, and natural textures with artificial colors. Although this might be falsely interpreted as his negligence, this was the outcome of his deep

contemplation that embraced personal reflection, demonstrating the courage he had in perpetuating his self-development.

This work is the second iteration of the *Tiang Berulang* series, in which its first iteration was made with different artistic styles and methods to be ‘almost’ conventionally made within the modern artistic principles. His former iteration substantiated spatial aesthetic harmony through three-dimensional means. Although abiding by the modernist rule, Supangkat (1995) saw that Sidharta managed to let his emotion flow freely in this work, expressing the depth of his inner dialogues. It appears that Sidharta never distanced himself from his creative process, despite being framed and ‘constrained’ within the paradigm of modernist formalism.

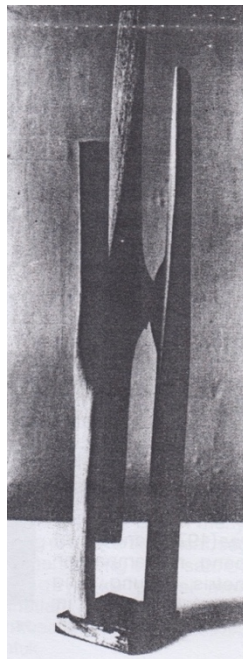


Figure 3: *Tiang Berulang*, 1971. (Source: Indonesia Visual Art Archive - IVAA)

Framing *Tiang Berulang* 1973 in Sidharta’s biographical timeline is worth some brief explanation: he revealed this approach after he had matured enough to master the principles of sculpture, which went in conjunction with the given mandate and responsibilities of fostering education at ITB. The 1973 iteration almost appeared to be initiated after he fulfilled his responsibilities to lay the groundwork for sculpture education. His idiosyncratic nature of rejecting stagnation and refusing comfort appeared prominently in this work. He was experimental, deconstructing the ‘sacred’ convention and restriction of modern art media by merging various styles, approaches, and materials. Despite having ‘unpleasant’ experiences after exposing his audacities and deliberate artistic expressions, as with the aftermath of *Kristus Hati Suci* and his first local solo exhibition in Yogyakarta after his study (see biographical notes in the introduction), he never ceased to deliberately expose his peculiarities and continue exploring this inclusive, unconventional approach. Almost similar to *Kristus Hati Suci* (1958), the second *Tiang Berulang* (1973) invited questions and skepticism, being received relatively indifferent mainly by the *Mazhab Bandung* circle, as (Supangkat, 1995) noted, this work was a “... disappointment for his peers”.

Tradition, Femininity, and Vitality

The second part of this section would highlight another phase of Sidharta's artistic evolution that was greatly influenced by his renewed interest in and passion for traditional arts'. Anindita (2020) said that this interest was revealed following his visit to Bali during the early 80s, upon which he encountered traditional artists whose artistic sensibilities lay in a harmonious balance between rational thinking and spiritual contemplation, an ideal state that inspired him to further employed in his artmaking. Further explaining, Anindita (2020) said that upon returning to Bandung, Sidharta realized the need to reinvigorate his interest in tradition, and reinvent their positions within modern culture. This return to tradition is also reflected in his statement within his solo show conducted in Bandung in 1975, in which he stated:

"I wish to reconnect myself with the traditional values, besides concurrently standing within today's ways of living; a hope for closing the gap between traditional values and contemporary living. ... I choose to approach this concern through a sustained attempt of continual dialogues that are close and intimate - with objects, forms, lores, thought processes, and any other outcomes that are resulted from traditional living and dialogue." (Anindita, 2020)

This interest was later prompted and eventually encouraged by the productive atmosphere provided by DECENTA, as previously stated in the introduction. Within this timeframe, from the mid-70s until the late 80s. Sidharta began to explore various materials, techniques, and mediums that were previously unfamiliar to him, including printmaking. Using this technique, Sidharta utilized color blocks, vibrant chromas, photographic rasters, symmetry, and repetition rather fluidly. Sidharta's sculptures also received various novel treatments as he began to utilize the flexibility provided by polyresin, a pliable material that was once dismissed for its lack of character and ingenuity. Also, various pictorial representations started to be explored within this timeframe, complementing his former formalist approach.

Sidharta's approach to tradition was far from conservative. He never aimed to 'safeguard' its purity. His contemplations were often reflective and personal while simultaneously cultural and 'national' regarding how the traditional value might be relevant to be adopted in modern Indonesian society. He also never fancied were not 'merely' visual but often operated idiosyncratically on the philosophical level. Within this second part, I will highlight the theme of vitality, particularly on the prowess of femininity in supporting life through its function as the provider of regeneration, along with its' relation to traditional values. To further explore this, there are three pieces that I would like to elaborate on further: *Bunga Persembahan* (Flower Offerings) -1979, *Kelahiran Seorang Dewi* (The Birth of a Goddess) - 1981; and *Kelahiran Dewi Batari* (The Birth of the Devi Bhatari) - 1982).

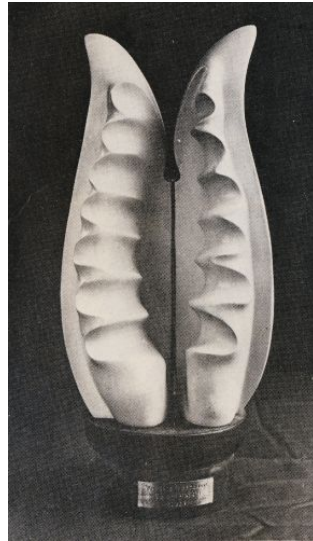


Figure 4. *Bunga Persembahan*, 1975. (Source: Supangkat, 1995)

Bunga Persembahan (1979) was one of the early works where Sidharta began to use polyresin. In this work, the concept of *Bunga*, or 'flower,' was manifested and interpreted somewhat metaphorically. Besides exposing its beauty, Sidharta emphasized its function: providing growth and reproduction, representing vitality. Generally, this work is comprised of two vertically opposed leaves configured in an almost symmetrical composition. The monochromatic shades that are apparent in this work further indicate this subtlety. It seemed that this work was created as an homage to feminine prowess that provides those vital powers and forces significant to life. His emphasis on function rather than beauty indicated his idiosyncratic nature in interpreting culture. For him, beauty in itself was incomplete, and it should 'function' to a certain extent to be meaningful. This appreciative gesture was reflected quite consistently, not only in its form and the title of the work but also in the creative process. Although working with polyresin might enable him to expand his exploration further, he chose not to expose its experimental features but to approach it through careful measure and examination.



Figure 5. *Kelahiran Seorang Dewi*, 1981. (Source: Arsip Artsociates - Indonesia)

Created two years after the previous work, *Kelahiran Seorang Dewi* (1981) displays a more exploratory nature of his gesture and contemplation toward tradition. His exploration was mainly facilitated by the character of the medium he chose, screenprint, which offers a relatively fluid process with an unpredictable outcome. To Zaelani's (2021) account, the creation of this work was motivated mainly by a significant event in his personal life, which was the birth of his first daughter that happened during the same year. Screenprint enabled Sidharta to include various complex visualities as his aesthetic strategy. Generally, this work was created by juxtaposing several photographic images with traditional ornamentation, which implied his point of view when he witnessed the birth of his daughter. He depicted the legs and breasts displayed relatively naturally, although somewhat deformed. Roughly in the center of the work, Sidharta defined an abstraction or symbolism of a vagina, decorated by traditional fractals that were repetitive and symmetrical. However, this geometrical composition did not diminish its organic and lively features. At the bottom of this symbol, there appeared to be the face of a female infant, as the metaphor for the 'goddess,' symbolizing his prayer for his firstborn. Sidharta utilized his privilege as an artist of using artmaking as a reflective means of his life within this work, which was personal, cultural, and philosophical. This also reflects his fluency in interpreting, reworking, and reformulating the value of traditional living with modern paradigms, modern artmaking, and art functioning in a spiritual context.

One year later, those concerns mentioned above seemed to further manifest through spatiality, using figurative sculpture as one of his already familiarized mediums. In *Kelahiran Dewi Batari* (1982), Sidharta started to extend his interpretive strategy by referring indirectly to tradition in a somewhat obscured approach. It was one of his qualities not to refer directly to a specific form of culture, for it might risk falling into fundamentalism and stagnation. Nevertheless, several traces might still point toward its reference. The sculpture itself depicts the gesture of a woman during labor, showing a relatively serene and blissful expression, far from the typically painful and unpleasant depiction. The figure presented is somehow deformed, similarly to the previous work, emphasizing the legs and the torso, with the addition of facial expression. Its facial features and coloring in general point toward the representation of Devi in Javanese *Wayang*. The term *Batari* or *Bhtari*, in actuality, is analogous to Devi itself. Although somewhat redundant, perhaps he intended to use this title as a point of returning to one's tradition: to that of Javanese culture. Appearing around the bottom center of the sculpture is a depiction of an infant holding a scarlet heart in his chest. Again, a representation of Sidharta's prayer for his daughter. This marked another point of Sidharta's deliberate move of being idiosyncratic. His argument towards art and culture was entangled with his idiosyncrasy and personal experience despite how sacred the context might be. Although exposed in such a deliberate manner, his gesture remained ethical, measured, and cultural. Here, his 'departure' from conservative measures was executed firmly yet ethically in opening various options for self-reflexivity.



Figure 6. *Kelahiran Dewi Batari*, 1982. (Source: Arsip Artsociates - Indonesia)

'Becoming' Indonesia

With his other colleagues in DECENTA, Sidharta took various opportunities for even more possible explorations in terms of medium and their contemplative attitudes. His approaches began to evolve even more fluently, arguably reaching another point of maturity in his artistic expression. After DECENTA, Sidharta continued to work as an individual artist, working both for his agenda and fulfilling public and private commissions. One quality that was quite specific to him was his inclusive nature. He was very peculiar; almost no other of his peers showed similar attitudes. His practice began to operate in a cyclic motion: pushing forward novel inventions while simultaneously revisiting former concerns and issues. This approach reflected how open-ended and all-embracing his practice was and how considerate he was in choosing the correct method in delivering his expression that often interacted with various cultural problems and concerns. He utilized abstraction, figurative depiction, and pictorial representation in his contemplative study of numerous issues: from harmony and balance, creation and vitality, to traditional lore and myth. Later, these internal dialogues would manifest through various forms and mediums, from painting, print, craftwork, and sculptures made from metal, wood, andesite, concrete, and polyresin. It was during this time that Sidharta achieved his firm stances and attitude toward Indonesian art and culture at the individual level, especially in its relation to implementing modernity, as reflected quite prominently in his *Tumbuh dan Berkembang* (Growth and Prosperity) series. The second (1988) and fourth (1991) iterations of this series might provide us insights into his attitude, as will be further explored in this third and last section.

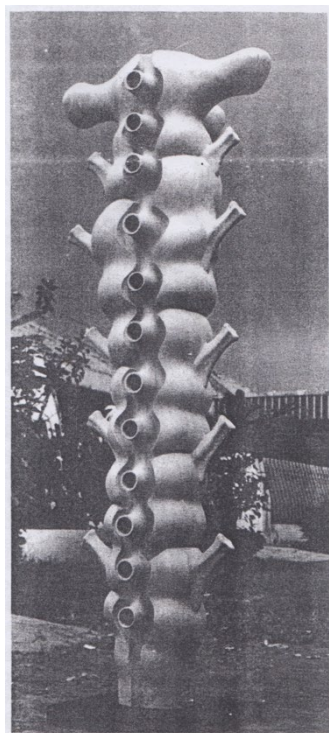


Figure 7. *Tumbuh dan Berkembang II*, 1988. (Source: Supangkat, 1995)

Tumbuh dan Berkembang series signify Sidharta's affirmation of how modernism might be valuable as a 'borrowed principle' for Eastern society, specifically for the Indonesian public. As figuratively stated in its titles which could be translated into 'growth and prosperity' and later in its aesthetic features, Sidharta expressed beliefs for the virtue of 'progress' as the key determining factor for our growth as a society. Almost coincidentally, this spirit was aligned with Indonesian policies during the New Order era centered around economic progress and rapid infrastructure development, which was believed to support stability and prosperity for its people, despite how authoritative it was delivered. In this series, Sidharta proposed to us how modern values might benefit Indonesian and Eastern society in general: firstly, through fluid and continual recontextualization of traditional values within modern principles as demonstrated in the second iteration (1988), and secondly by treating modernity as a propelling agent of progress and social basis as reflected in the fourth iteration (1991). Although both of these works shared similar visions, the difference in artistic approaches employed in them might suggest some variants - or even a dichotomy - of philosophical trajectories in adapting modernism. This, in a way, also signifies Sidharta's expansive and profound knowledge and insights as well as an artist.

The second *Tumbuh dan Berkembang* (1988) manifests Sidharta's proposals of how recontextualization of traditional values within a modernist society might coexist. His former interest in vitality and creation, which might indirectly refer to tradition considering his history, reappeared in this public installation. In terms of aesthetic features, the context of vitality is again presented in the form of a plant, similar to that of a cactus, albeit on a large scale. In this work, he began to employ modularity, enabling him to explore repetition and redundancies within three-dimensional masses. These organic forms create a predominantly vertical emphasis while sequentially comple-

mented by horizontality, implying close interconnections between a dichotomy. According to Supriyadi et al. (2012), this composition carries traditional symbolism of harmonious dualisms between corresponding polarities that are ever-present in life: between men and women, life and death, et cetera.

Further explaining, Supriyadi et al. (2012), interpreted his module as a hybrid between male and female symbols merging into a harmonious state configured in such a way to signify growth. Apart from how prominent traditional symbolism in this monument is, I believe that Sidharta's intent was also promoting the adoption of modernism, although subtly operating at the metaphorical level, as vaguely envisioned in its title. It should also be worth considering the commissioning process of these monuments, sponsored by the Korean Government during the 90s and installed in Olympic Park, Seoul, South Korea. It seems that Sidharta seized this opportunity to fulfill the commission and publicize his work and promote and introduce Indonesian culture to international audiences.



Figure 8. *Tumbuh dan Berkembang IV*, 1991. (Source: Arsip Galeri Nasional Indonesia)

The fourth iteration of *Tumbuh dan Berkembang*, produced in 1991, proposes another trajectory of implementing modern values for our society through a rather affirmative reception, if not confirmation. Similar to the previous work, this monument also signifies Dharta's strategy of utilizing modularity and repetition. If previously his module was decorated with irregular curves and organic form, he explored rigid geometries using metal planes in this fourth iteration to present order and structure. Each module offers an intricate harmony in its visuality: some sides are folded inside, and some planes are skewed while simultaneously dissected, bent to form a repetitive triangular pattern. The complete installation almost signifies the process of entanglement through a complexly intricate means. Sidharta further complicated this composition through a specific coloring treatment. Those metal planes are painted with a vibrant hue and color, forming a crisscrossing pattern of triangles and squares. Shades of scarlet, ultramarine, and cadmium green overlap somewhat playfully, while a hazy cloud grey neutralizes and simplifies that vibrancy. In a media review, *'Metafora untuk Metropol'* (1990), Yuliman (1990) praised this work for '... presenting a clever and sophisticated metaphor for our contemporary metropolitan life.'

Considering Sidharta's overall formal configurations, this fourth iteration almost explicitly states his endorsement of modernism, yet various traces of traditional values, albeit subtly, remain traceable in some of its features. By sharing similar spirits with the other pieces of this series, we may also see this fourth iteration as exposing the paradoxical views of tradition toward dualism, presented as a form of 'hybridism' that lets two antagonist entities appear simultaneously in coexistence. Various paradoxes, such as closeness and openness (provided by the folding of the metal sheets), opacity and transparency (from the opaque materials and the intermittent wholes), painting and sculpture (from the coloring), and lastly, the planar (of the material) and the spatial (of the final composition), demonstrate how these negotiative space might liaise the tensions between the two. This installation also exposes Sidharta's aptitude for exposing traditional symbolism through both organic forms and measured geometry. As clearly shown in both of these installations, repetitions signify his hope for us to grow and advance in harmony. I might argue that these peculiar artistic gestures might work beyond the typical 'iconic' representation, which relies heavily on similarity and direct relation to its referent but operates at an indexical or symbolic level. The previous sensibility of considering the societal context of the site of his installation reappears in this fourth iteration. Previously his intention was aimed at introducing Indonesian culture to the global forum. Still, for this particular piece, that intention is slightly shifted to lie primarily in signifying Indonesian achievement for reaching a specific state of modernity. As seen in its current installation in the Pakubuwono district of South Jakarta, this monument confirms how modern values might support the formation of a productive Eastern society while simultaneously claiming the right to be a legitimate participant of the once envisioned 'universal modernism.' Although Sidharta was—arguably—lacking in realizing how evenly distributed these achievements in the national level, his aptitude in situating this work within the context of Jakarta, our most significant metropolises, remained relevant.

Conclusions

These selections of artworks reflect Sidharta's gradual process of sustaining a continual self-dialogue within his relentless attempts to negotiate harmony between various dichotomies he encountered during his life. Negotiation has always been the key to liaising between the ephemeral dialogue of piety and local wisdom, personal values and social utility, conserving rules and exploring alternatives, sacred values and trivial routine, and other polarities. All of these concerns have appeared cyclically within Sidharta's body of works. In addition to advocating 'cultural negotiation,' Sidharta's practice also signified his unending attempt to find, formulate, and evaluate the meaning of Indonesian values as reflected in its arts and culture. The reader might argue that this concern of negotiating harmony was not exclusively reflected only in Sidharta's practice. Yet, it doesn't mean that his approach was not without its particular merit. His gestures were often anchored in his idiosyncrasy, pivoting from the self as the bearing for his attitude. Furthermore, Sidharta's version of individualism finds its relevance to contemporary arts' self-referentiality rather than modernists' jargon of artists as individual geniuses. Sidharta has shown us sensibilities that surpass the mainstream modernist spirit circulated during his time, as clearly indicated by his deliberate move in sourcing to his personal experience rather than being subsumed by grandiose delusi-

ons of being the cultural avant-garde, and thus becoming 'proto-contemporary. Gregorius Sidharta, with his critical and deliberate demeanor, denied the modern arrogance and grandiose while deciding to recourse to various alternatives. He articulated how personal views and experiences might offer valuable insights into artmaking. For him, art was a site where anything could merge: oneself, the communal, the cultural, even the spiritual. Letting one's personal and domestic intent manifest through artistic means shouldn't degrade their cultural relevance. This all-embracing attitude was also reflected in how he explored the possible intersection between modern values and traditional principles, liaising the tension by creating hybrid formulae of revealing traditional symbolisms using formalism as its methods. To conclude, all of these ventures envision Sidharta's version of Indonesian values as a particular model of nationalism which once formed under the shared feeling of colonial oppression that embraces multiple originative legacies of premodern values (tradition, religion, and localities) while simultaneously open and adaptive to contemporaneous thinking and ideologies (modernism, postmodernism, and recent critical thinking). Sidharta suggested that despite how antithetical and polarizing the manifestations of these values might be, the possibilities of negotiating a coexistence within a democratic, 'horizontal' axis remained viable. Within this context, he introduced the importance of embracing thoughtful idiosyncrasy and contemplative individualism as the midpoint of orientation upon arbitrating and liaising these contradictions, in which their existence would almost be inevitable.

Acknowledgments

I express my gratitude to Jim Supangkat and Rizki A. Zaelani for various rigorous yet stimulating discussions centered around the ingenuity of Gregorius Sidharta's practice, which later inspired me to conduct a series of research regarding him. I also want to extend this gratitude to Mrs. Andonowati and her ArtSociates for providing access to Sidharta's archive, records, and other vital materials that are not readily available in the public repository. Lastly, I wish to extend this acknowledgment to Nisrina Irbah Sati, for assisting in both editing and proofreading this article.

References

- Anindita, P. (2020). *G. Sidharta Soegijo: Merengkuh yang lalu dan kini*. Direktorat Kesenian, Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Indonesia.
- Barrett, T. (2004). *Criticizing art: Understanding the contemporary (TH Lee, Trans.)* ((2nd ed.)). ArtBooks (Original work published 2000).
- Fakih, F. (2012). Conservative corporatist: Nationalist thoughts of aristocrats: The ideas of Soetatmo Soeriokoesoemo and Noto Soeroto. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 168(4), 420–444. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23339341>
- Feldman, E. B. (1967). *Art as image and idea*. Prentice-Hall.
- Greenberg, C. (1971). *Art and culture: Critical essays* (Vol. 212). Beacon Press.
- Gumilar, G. (2018). *Wacana seni rupa kontemporer dalam penyelenggaraan biennial di Indonesia pada periode 1993-2003* [Institut Teknologi Bandung]. <https://digilib.itb.ac.id/index.php/gdl/view/27455>
- Hapsoro, C. D., & Wiyanto, H. (2020). *Pusaka seni rupa: Seni patung Indonesia modern*. Direktorat Kesenian, Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Indonesia.

- Holt, C. (1967). *Art in Indonesia: continuities and change*. Cornell University Press.
- Kusmara, A. R. (2011). *Medium seni dalam medan sosial seni rupa kontemporer Indonesia*. Disertasi Program Doktor Ilmu Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institut Teknologi Bandung.
- Lanti, I. G., & Dermawan, W. (2020). Examining the growth of islamic conservatism in Indonesia: The case of West Java. In *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia* (pp. 54–79). Routledge. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19934>
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1979). *1984: The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Munroe, A. (1997). Contemporary art in Asia: Traditions/tensions. *Artforum*, 35(8), 8. <https://www.artforum.com>
- Poshyananda, A. (1996). *Contemporary art in Asia: Traditions, tensions*. Craftsman House. <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/traditionstensions-100396-122396/>
- Pribadi, Y. (2021). *Rising Islamic conservatism in Indonesia: Islamic groups and identity politics*. 29(4). doi: 10.1080/0967828X.2021.2009255
- Smith, T. (2011). Currents of world-making in contemporary art. *World Art*, 1(2), 171–188.
- Sudjoko, S. (1992). *Menuju nirada*. Galeri Nasional Indonesia.
- Supangkat, J. (1995). *Lukisan, patung, dan grafis G. Sidharta*. Rekamedia Multiprakarsa.
- Supangkat, J. (2001). *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the contemporary Indonesian art scene* (C. A. Foundation (ed.)). Cemeti Art Foundation.
- Supangkat, J., & Yuliman, S. (1982). *Gregorius Sidharta di tengah seni rupa Indonesia*. Gramedia.
- Supriyadi, J., Sabana, S., & Adriati, I. (2012). Kesadaran mental-kultural perupa dalam praktek seni rupa kontemporer Indonesia: Refleksi dalam kajian karya dan perupa G. Sidharta Soegijo. *Seminar Internasional Warisan Nusantara Indonesia 2012*.
- Wallis, B., Acker, K., Baudrillard, J., Borges, J. L., Crary, J., Foster, H., Hoberman, J., Jameson, F., Krauss, R., & Lawson, T. (1984). *Art after modernism: Rethinking representation*. The New Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Yuliman, S. (1990). Metafora untuk metropol. *Tempo*.
- Zaelani, R. (2021). *Kelahiran seorang dewi: Imaginary dialogues with G. Sidharta Soegijo*. Artsociates - Lawangwangi.