

Reflecting on a Century of André Breton's Surrealism: Surrealistic art exhibition at the Oei Hong Djien Museum

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Abstract

Surrealism has grown since 1924 – 21 years before the Republic of Indonesia was founded. Yet this art movement has found fertile ground in Indonesia. Art communities in the country have well-embraced keywords associated with Surrealism, such as automatism, chance, unconscious, dream world, and juxtapositions. After doing literature studies and observing the works projected for the 100 years of André Breton's surrealism exhibition at the Oei Hong Djien Museum, to open in October 2024 until February 2025, we have found there are more important points of Surrealism that have been missed to infuse into the curatorial writing for enhancing the exhibition.

Keywords: André Breton's tenets; revolt arts; Indonesian art

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1.0 Introduction

The Surrealist Manifesto was introduced in Paris by André Breton and his colleagues in late October 1924. At the time, the Republic of Indonesia did not exist yet; it was still Netherland's Dutch East Indies, whose capital was Batavia. The Proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia took place on 17 August 1945, yet the Netherlands just transferred the sovereignty to the Republic of Indonesian States on the 17th of December 1949. Less than three weeks the newly founded Republic of Indonesia (RI) founded the Academy of Visual Arts Yogyakarta (ASRI Yogyakarta), through which knowledge, discourses, and information of art transferred and developed, including Modern Art. Surrealism was one of the art movements of modern art, it is still considered to have equal significance as romanticism of the 19th century. Surrealism actively characterized the constellation of the art world from 1924 until its leader, André Breton, died in 1966. We intend that Surrealists' habit of writing and publishing articles on their art world could motivate art communities to do so..

Marianto (1993) describes that surrealism art began to squirm, attract attention, and became one of the popular choices for fine art in the 1970s. Surrealism art significantly colored the art world in Yogyakarta in the 1980s. Yogyakarta, at the time, had become one of

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the country's art centers where many artists and art students from many parts of the country. ASRI Yogyakarta which became STSRI "ASRI" Yogyakarta, a college of visual arts, provided art education to students from provinces across the country (now the college had become the Faculty of Visual Arts of Indonesia Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta – ISI Yogyakarta). The college had a staff member named Sudarso Supadmo who translated and published several modern art books into Indonesian and published pre-books and books on ancient Indonesian art. Many of the *civitas academica* of STSRI "ASRI" Yogyakarta and other education institutions used and learned modern art from translations by Supadmo and some books imported from the USA and the UK.

In short, study materials on surrealism were available for lecturers and students. However, in those times, many people often said that the studio work and the end-products of art were more important than theories of discourses of art. In this sense, the habit of reading and the desire to delve into theoretical material from written sources have not yet developed. Theoretical materials and the value of theory courses seemed to still be subordinate to the value of practical classes or studio work. Most students are still more interested in pictures and visual illustrations than the content of the text. Reproductions of surrealists such as Max Ernst, Juan Miró, Méret Oppenheim, René Magritte, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, and Salvador Dali were the favorite works of art learners. It is significant to note that when discussing surrealism, many people connected only certain words or chunks of knowledge to it, such as Freud's concept of the unconscious and subconscious, automatism, chance, juxtaposition, and imagination. Surrealism art became synonymous with works that look absurd, strange, and incongruous, with a situation or condition with a quiet and haunted look, or as a deserted space.

Through a literature study, this research aimed to discover other words, points, advocacies, or thoughts of Breton's surrealism, which might have been misread or neglected. The study's objective is to understand essential points of Breton's Surrealism tenets to use in selecting the works of art for the exhibition, preparing the curatorial wall text, and writing the post-event catalog/book. The results were words, phrases, or visions on surrealism to prepare a post-exhibition text so that later, the exhibition of 100 Years of André Breton's surrealism at the Oei Hong Djien (OHD) Museum not only presents curated Indonesian surrealism works but also produces writing that could revibrate understandings and knowledge of surrealism, which may have become cliché or too literary.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Surrealism

Short (1966) states that surrealism was a political movement; participated by a hundred writers and artists, in the period between World War I and World War II. They had the most influence on the intellectual climate of that period compared to any other movement. What is significant here is that Short's point that surrealism was also important in shaping the intellectual atmosphere among the people of that period.

Polizzoti (2024) affirms that Surrealism is a continual movement; echoes of radical and critical voices continue to echo everywhere until now as a criticism of social and political life. Its strength is that journal texts are circulated everywhere and translated into many countries, fostering the intellectual consciousness of individuals and society at every age and in every country (Polizzotti, 2024) (Levett, 2024).

Automatism, chance, the omnipotence of dreams, and sub-consciousness are terminologies offered by Breton (as cited in Rosemont, 1978) for surrealism. It is the moral honesty and artistic integrity of the artist, with which one truly expresses the *rasa* (sense of feeling) of something he feels the most, in order to obtain the most important effect, which is something that he digs out of the subconscious world with consciousness. Breton's idea on surrealism (as cited in Rosemont, 1978, p. 317) states: "*Surrealism is not a new or an easier means of expression nor even a metaphysics of poetry. It is a means of total liberation of the mind and of all that resembles it.*"

The ideas for surrealism came from some of Breton's predecessors. The word "surrealism" was revived as a new word (neologism), meaning "more than reality". In this context, surrealism is a new way or view of the world in which surrealists propose something new. To bear novelties, the surrealists pay essential attention to the word: "chance," which appears casually (unplanned) (Rosemont, 1978). Its origin came from the word "sur-reality" once used by the famous poet and writer Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), meaning extraordinary reality (Hughes, 1991, p. 213).

Free chatter was also a significant activity amongst the surrealists to enrich the sense of art. They walked around Paris to discuss by cynicism the buildings, sites, and significant centers they passed by; and laughed at the places that had become popular tourist sites and academic education centers. These activities were meant to condition themselves for having intense and engaging contact with daily life (Hughes, 1991). With such a concept in mind, they saw the critical conversations between them, wandering around the streets of Paris, and discussing the city's urban situation as important happenings; either an art practice or an aesthetic activity, and even as an art form that reveals any possibilities of surrealism (Marshall, 2023).

Surrealism focused on the dream world to prepare for a new reality that transcends reality and unreality. André Breton was so inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory; he was so interested in Freudian concept of the subconscious, the id, and free association analysis. Nevertheless, Breton refused Freudianism; for example, in psychoanalysis, Freud intended to cure neurosis, while Breton saw it as an essential mental instrument (Hughes, 1991). Interestingly, Fenton (2004) writes that surrealism interest was to counter worldwide capitalism.

2.2 Surrealism Outside France

Kiejewicz (2017) in her article writes that surrealism reached Japan in 1926, not long after surrealism was launched by Breton; surrealism writings were brought by the poet Junzaburō Nishiwaki. However, when surrealism emerged among Japanese artists in the

1920s, the community had a solid nationalistic sense of art; they were determined not to merely adopt Breton's surrealism but adapt it to Japanese conditions by incorporating local myths and beliefs in creating surrealist art. From her description, it is worth mentioning that the idea of surrealism migrated to Japan soon after its emergence.

Tailanga (2008) describes that surrealism also grew and developed in Thailand in the 1960s in fine arts, literatures, and films. The information and visuality of France surrealism they get from the history of modern art and from books imported into Thailand, socialized and spread through art education institutions. Artists, writers, and filmmakers welcome forms and techniques. Therefore, through the surrealist works that develop, we can say that there is misreading and misinterpretation of the essence of surrealism. As a result, the philosophy and ideology of surrealism that was fought for and socialized by the writers, and followers of French surrealism were not well socialized, even considered the best by Thailand surrealists.

Fu (2022) says that many surrealist painters emerged in China. Those artists also used the unique artistic techniques of the surrealist school and the Chinese style of surrealist art to create their art, showing an art style and style that is increasingly popular among the Chinese. Fu writes "surrealism broke the shackles of traditional painting and enriched the language of surrealist painting with a variety of methods such as 'collage' and 'printmaking', giving off a more brilliant artistic light" (p. 16).

Marianto (1995) specifically discusses surrealism in Indonesia. The issue of surrealism has not become a discourse in the art community in academic and non-academic institutions, at least until the end of the second half of the 1960s. Around Indonesia's Independence, the artists are still busy with the issues of seizing Indonesia's independence and forming the national identity of the State and Nation of Indonesia. In the 1950s, ideological divisions between artist groups and artists' organizations emerged due to the *cold war* between the Eastern Bloc led by the PRC and the Soviet Union, and the Western Bloc led by the USA and the United Kingdom. Some works that present surrealism have begun to appear, for example, in some works by Harjadi and S. Sudjojono. In the 1960s, the contrasting ideological teachings between the Eastern group (communism) and the Western group (universal humanism) was founded. The ideological feud that affects the world of artists, culturalists, and intellectuals, as well as the military constellation, culminates in political, social, and humanitarian conflicts that are not over until the dissertation is completed. Marianto wrote that surrealism that emerged and was discontinued through art lectures, at least at STSRI "ASRI" Yogyakarta, has triggered the emergence of various kinds of surrealism that have been internalized through stories, legends, and local myths, as well as puppet performances where juxtapositions from the world of consciousness, the subconscious world, and the absurdity of daily socio-cultural life are symptomatic. Here, Marianto exposes and discusses several surrealist works that, according to him, are directly or unaffected by the environment and the discourse from which surrealist works emerge.

As a closing point in this section, we formulate that surrealism is so attractive, inspirational, adaptable, and transformative that its popularity makes André Breton's thoughts and vision worthy of observation. Here, we can paraphrase his thought, that: by or through poetic means, the capacity of human thought can overcome and transcend the conventional limits of ordinary thought; art and life can complement and enliven each other by tapping or greeting areas of the mind that are often ignored or forbidden (Hughes, 1991).

2.3 Surrealism Beyond Borders

D'Alesandro shows that Surrealism has already expanded to various cities on the existing continent; have vitality and emerge through various unique or particular social, cultural, and political conditions and circumstances; presenting local potentials where Surrealism grows whose concept and appearance are also different from Paris Breton Surrealism; as if it has become new kinds of surrealism (D'Alesandro, 2021)

3.0 Methodology

In seeking and adapting significant points from Breton's thoughts and teachings which might have been missed or neglected to enrich the literacy about surrealism to the art public through the exhibition text, we borrow findings from Chen and Pan (2024). They write that the translation of Parisian surrealism texts into Chinese has contributed significantly to the modernization of Chinese art. Through these translation efforts, young artists as translators express their pioneering art concepts through translation whilst expressing their own desire to become 'reformists' of Chinese art and at the same time, be 'mediators' who bridge modern Chinese and Western art. They point out that the translation ultimately conceptualized an unprecedented 'Chinese surrealism,' which was very different from the original Western surrealism.

In this research, we observe surrealist works of around 65 artists that will contribute to the exhibition at the OHD Museum. The artists selected come from different regions in Indonesia, such as Mahdi Abdullah (Aceh), Dicky Takndare (Papua), M. Muklis Lugis (Makassar), Nyoman Masriadi (Bali), Diah Yulianti) South Kalimantan, Eddy Sulisty (Yogyakarta), Lenny Weichert (Jakarta), Venzha Christ (Banyuwangi), F. Sigit Pramono (East Java), and Mella Jaarsma (expatriate artist from the Netherlands). To choose the significant points from the reading materials. This research use Hans Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic theory as one of the methods of understanding, as written in a book by Hardiman (2015), as productive hermeneutics. In interpreting these quotes, we fuse André Breton's horizon and the horizon of selected surrealist whose works of art would be present in the exhibition. We observed the sample artists work to see whether they accommodated local or ethnic storytelling or mythologies or not. The reasoning is that many local legends and storytelling often depict or tell something absurd and seemingly irrational. We also interviewed them to find out what they thought about Breton Surrealism or surrealism they thought.

4.0 Findings

Breton was an inventive thinker, poet, writer, and artist, perceptive and morally well. He believed that art not only has vitality but also has the power to change lives. (Hughes, 1991, p. 212). This information states that Breton is a person who has multi-skills in making art, writing, lecturing, conceptualizing, and conceptualizing various things related to art, culture, and politics. One of the Indonesian modern art founders, namely S- Soedjojo, whose early works of art depict human activities in surreal landscapes and atmospheres, not only painted but also wrote articles criticizing socio-cultural lives with static systems of aesthetics (Spanjard, 2018).

Breton advocates that to generate new ideas in the context of Surrealism; we should understand that art and life are two entities that can complement and strengthen each other. To do so, we could contact forbidden areas or unthinkable spots in the unconscious (Hughes, 1991, p. 213). He also writes that Breton asserts the significance of freedom of speech and of interpretation to free man from the confines of logic, morality, and vested interest; therefore, man can recover their genuine spirit.

In view of André Breton, surrealism is not an easier way or approach to art, and neither is metaphysical poetry; rather, it is a way to free the mind from its confinement. In the realm of praxis, surrealists developed walking around the streets of Paris, to stop and discuss places, buildings, or centers of urban activity critically and with cynicism to express their anti-global-capitalism stand. For them, such free talk is very important as it involves practical art and, at the same time, aesthetic activities. From interviewing samples of respondents of artists, art students, and art teachers, we found that many still thought that surrealism was a style to create absurd, irrational: or randomly juxtaposed images with a deserted and empty atmosphere.

5.0 Discussion

In an interview with André Breton not long before he passed away, Franklin Rosemont noted that Breton once confirmed surrealism had existed before him. He was confident that surrealism would last continuously (Rosemont, 1978). This means that there had been surrealist works before the Surrealism of Breton, as long the artist applies automatism in exploring ideas from imagination, the sub-conscious world, and dreams without any filtering of logic and rationalism.

Breton's statement that surrealism will continue, despite its ups and downs, has at least proven that his writings have been translated into various countries, including Japan and China (Wu, 2014; Chen & Pan, 2024). Surrealism is included in a book by Honour and Fleming (2005), which says that the purpose of surrealism, the explanation, with photographs of some prominent surrealist figures' works are proof that surrealism continues to live and develop. Supadmo (1993) in his article, "Surrealisme Indonesia: Bentuk dan Motivasi Kelahirannya" [Indonesian surrealism: Form and the motivation for its birth], writes about the development of surrealism in Indonesia. While in Australia, Ades (1993) also expresses her idea regarding surrealism in her essay, "Surrealism as Art." The fact we are now at the final stage of exhibiting at the Indonesian surrealism exhibition proves that surrealism is growing.

Surrealism is a movement of artists and intellectuals whose ideology was against bourgeois and global capitalism (Short, 1966; Fenton, 2004; Honour & Fleming, 2005). It can therefore be assumed that the writings and lectures must have influenced the thinking of many people in France and outside France, including the texts translated into English, Japanese, and Chinese that had a significant impact. The conclusion is that surrealism is more concerned with the way of view, attitude, or practice in daily life, it does not focus on pure art and aesthetics.

Surrealism by Breton and his colleagues is not to find a style or visual system to make it easier for people to do art, but rather to be flexible and willing to think that does not only focus on mere rationalism, but also greets and embraces the underworld, imagination, and dream world through automatism to find new possibilities and increase probabilities in generating new ideas.

Surrealism underlines concrete activities, praxis involved in daily real life is an attitude and way of life to concretely express various ideas and concepts obtained from exploring the world of dreams, the unconscious, and imagination to be realized through real works that are material, media, and the way they are constantly moving and changing, such as dreams, imagination, and the underworld that are constantly changing into anything.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Surrealism is not a style, formula, or way to create art that looks absurd, strange, or awkward, but rather an approach to seeking new ideas, new perspectives, or new understandings of reality. .

André Breton, a poet, writer, artist, and speaker, stated that thinking is not enough only by relying on rationality or being anchored to narrow and linear logic but must also appreciate and greet the world of dreams, the subconscious, imagination, in order to present something beyond realism or logics because the world of dreams, the subconscious, and imagination contain any possibility and probabilities.

The perspective suggested by Breton is the same as the way of thinking of creative people in the past or present who composed stories, wrote metaphors, and built transcendental or monumental works. Their creative or innovative ideas must come from various sources that are presented in a dynamic, zig-zag, non-linear manner through imagination, openness, and mental flexibility in thinking, experiencing, and re-expressing them through a transformative process.

Breton's approach through automatism, free juxtaposition, chance, imagination, exploration of the underworld, and dream exploration concocted for surrealism proved very influential and attractive to many artists, poets, writers, and creators in various countries around the world.

No less critical is Breton's thought that art and life can complement each other and make a living. This teaching is very relevant for today's life, where people are increasingly aware that everything turns out to be interconnected and mutually influencing.

His contributions and dissemination of ideas through Breton's lectures also need to be appreciated and emulated, for the development of art and human civilization. Breton transformed the pessimism, skepticism, and anti-rationalism of the Dada movement, which grew rapidly due to the disappointment of the First World War, through thoughts and wisdom into a surrealism that was constructive, critical, and inspiring. We will apply these facts, discourses, and information to enrich the exhibition's textual publication, as well as to enhance the exhibition of a century of André Breton's surrealism at the OHD Museum.

Nevertheless, this research did not include any question to investigate how artists and academicians in some art institutions understood Surrealism whether as a style or as an awareness in exploring new and fresh ideas. This issue will be a significant topic to study.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper provides additional, or underlining, specific material on the points of André Breton's teachings and thoughts on knowledge and discourse, which are rarely discussed among Indonesian surrealists and the art public.

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