

# Bandung Photo Showcase

## Case Study of Hybrid Photography Exhibition

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### ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic affects many factors in the life of modern society, one of which is art. Many art events have been postponed and many galleries have been temporarily closed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This force majeure forces art activists to think more creatively in organizing exhibitions or other art events. One way to do this is by conducting online exhibitions. The use of digital platforms as exhibition platforms may not be new, but this pandemic is forcing people to learn and use digital technology to their full potential as quickly as possible. Bandung Photo Showcase is an exhibition activity that adapts to these conditions. The series of exhibition activities held from November 2020 to January 2021 at the Soemardja Gallery FSRD-ITB (and the extended exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space), invited 12 artists from 7 countries, applied the hybrid method by using both online and offline approach simultaneously. To maintain health protocols and physical distance, only limited visitors can view the exhibition offline, while opening, virtual exhibition, and discussions were also carried out online through social media channels. The goal of this research is to examine the new kind of exhibition phenomena that is safe to conduct in the pandemic era that could be a new normal kind of exhibition. The data on this research are obtained through reviewing curatorial records, books, documentation, and interviews. The term photography in this paper refers to the (fine) “art photography” which specifically discusses (or places) photography as the part of visual art practice, to distinguish it from “art of photography” which refers to a set of skills and fine tuning in order to create a picture using a camera. In general, this paper is expected to become a note for the progress of art events during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia and the world, and specifically to record this event in the history of photography in Indonesia. This paper is also expected to be an insight and input in developing new exhibition methods that can reach more audiences. Not only in the context of responding to the pandemic, but in the long run it will also be useful in developing a wider market linkage, as well as fostering a new discourse. The digital approach in this hybrid exhibition may not convey the whole information required by the audiences to be fully submerged into the artworks. It lacks aura and other spatial information, but on the other hand it helps us to virtually see the exhibition without risking our safety in such a pandemic condition.

**Keywords:** *Bandung Photo Showcase, photography, online exhibition, hybrid exhibition, COVID-19.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Born in the Industrial Revolution era, photography is often seen as an invention that promises convenience for its enthusiasts. Not only as a mechanical system that requires technical skills, but also as a medium of work. The convenience offered by photography, apart from being a marker of the acceleration of the times, is often seen as a satire for artists who are active in photography or those who base their visual ideas on photography [1]. The example can be seen in an 1840 engraving by Henri-Gerard Fontallard, “Les Daguerreopipeurs ou Le talent vient en dormant” that also serves as cover for *Aujourd’hui: Journal des ridicules*, which illustrates a photographer that falls asleep with his camera still capturing image on his side [2]. No more struggling to learn anatomy, perspective, isometry, or other drawing techniques; armed with a camera in hand and the object to be captured, one can easily secure a scene right in the moment when the button is pressed. In essence this process is much quicker than investing time and learning every element of the drawing technique.

At the beginning of its birth, the photo refers to the results of images on a field produced through a series of chemical reactions with the help of light. Photography itself has a literal meaning of drawing with light [1]. The birth of photography with a background in the development of science places photography as a medium whose development goes hand in hand, it may even be said that it depends on the progress of creativity. Its proximity to the development of popular technology allows it to be present in society as a democratic medium.

Now, almost two centuries after photography was found, the development of technology around photography seems to be endless, each manufacturer competing to create superior devices with more affordable prices. Through this rapid development, photos can be said to be a product that can be reproduced almost unlimitedly either physically or in virtual spaces. This phenomenon is what the late Sanento Yuliman called “ledakan gambar”, or the image boom [3]. Photography is no longer foreigner to our lives, more precisely it has become part of the visual culture of modern society.

The ease of capturing images and duplicating them in other fields seems to put the process of taking pictures as an effortless activity, although this is not

always the case. Photography which was later adopted as an art medium has now become an autonomous medium. Photography can question itself; it no longer has to be in the shadow of another branch of art. As a branch of science that is studied in the academic realm, photography is also studied further and promoted in various discourses. Therefore, a discussion is needed that is not only about the development of image-making technology, furthermore it takes an investigation of the phenomena that have arisen more substantial, namely the influence of photography in the community. This investigation is expected to be a bridge of knowledge for the audience, especially practitioners and academics who are involved in the world of photography.

## 2. CONTENTS

Photography has indeed become part of the visual culture of modern society, the use of tools and the practice of photography itself is something that we usually do without us realizing it, but not many exhibitions bring photography in the realm of academics [4]. This condition prompted the holding of an exhibition with the full title *Road to Triennale Photography: Bandung Photo Showcase: Invasion of The Lens: Culture Resistance and Aesthetics*, abbreviated as RT BPS 2020, which was originally planned to be held from August to September 2020 but had to be rescheduled to November until December 2020 due to pandemic.

Presenting an art event in the current pandemic era is not easy. The exhibition curated by Henricus Napitsunargo, which was originally scheduled for August 2020, involving various galleries and art institutions in Bandung, as well as photography practitioners both from within and outside the country, had to be postponed and adapted to the pandemic conditions that began to hit the world in early 2020. With all the limitations faced, this exhibition was then made more specifically focused on photography artists from 7 countries including Indonesia. From these 7 countries, 12 delegate artists were chosen: namely Ali Mecca (Indonesia), Ryota Katsukura (Japan), Anna Kedziora (Poland), Kamila Kobierzyńska (Poland), Chien-Hua Huang (Taiwan), Wan-Ling Chen (Taiwan), Jim Rammer (USA), Peter Fitzpatrick (USA), Yong Hwan Lee (Korea), Kang Jaegu (Korea), Phan Quang (Vietnam), and Nguyễn Thế Sơn (Vietnam). There are 30 titles of works displayed in this exhibition with various presentation techniques [5].

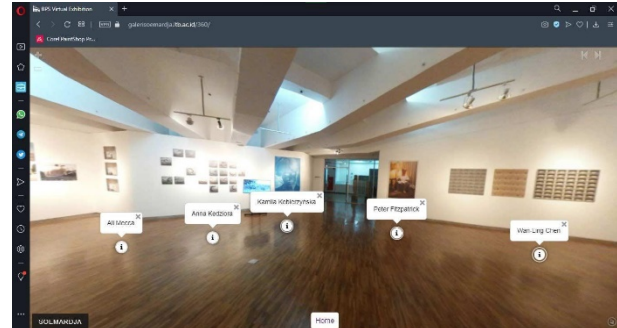
These twelve artists are also involved in the academic world, as lecturers or professors. This is intentionally done to promote photography as an academic inquiry. Just like other academic fields, photography also continues to be researched, developed, and investigated in a more serious academic atmosphere. The academic tradition upholds deep research in every discipline. These artists, through the works they create, indirectly present their experiments, findings, and thoughts in the photography practice they are involved in.

Art is a field that has always been the initiator and indicator of change in every node of civilization history, it is also a field that can be relied on in discourse development as a means of public awareness through any media. Photography as one of the visual media also cannot be separated from the intervention of art in its body, especially new art. The questions and challenges (especially) of contemporary art can easily be linked to the photography media in both criticism and practice. Departing from that, it is quite reasonable if today we need to observe photography practices in various cultural backgrounds and how they respond to this media through practitioners who seriously take photography media from various genres in the contemporary art corridor [4].

In this exhibition we can see restlessness, criticism, how photography media has played and experimented with different ways; either its technique or concept, cultural identity, personal identity, collective memories, and construction of personal imagination look very sophisticated to elaborate in all artworks in this exhibition [6]. If we look at Kang Jaegu's work where he photographed three young men without any clothes, they are soldiers from South Korean army enlistment and they are portrayed as themselves with no uniform or any clothes to identify who they are. Their expressions are blank and uncertain, the portrait of a young adult getting ready for their necessary step to become more mature according to their society.

The RT BPS 2020 exhibition then applies a hybrid method, namely online and offline implementation. The exhibition can be visited on a limited basis offline to maintain health protocols and physical distancing but can also be watched online. Invitations, openings, and discussions were also conducted online through social media channels. This series of exhibition activities was held offline from November 25 to December 4, 2020, at the Galeri Soemardja FSRD-ITB and the extended exhibition was held from January 7 to February 7, 2021, at Selasar Sunaryo Art

Space. Meanwhile, the online exhibition has been open since November 25, 2020, and can still be watched today on the Soemardja Gallery website. The discussion was held on December 15, 2020, through the YouTube channel.



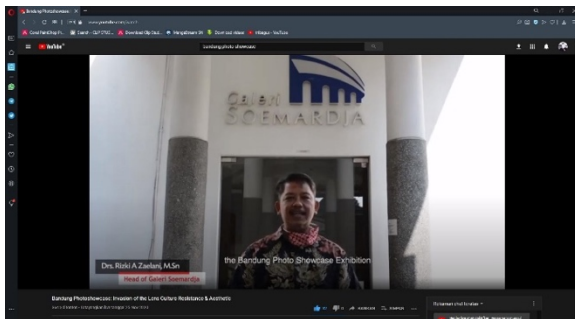
**Figure 1** Screenshot of Galeri Soemardja Virtual Gallery for BPS 2020.

Due to the problem of sending works from abroad, the works exhibited in this series of exhibitions are exhibition copies. This term commonly used in printmaking practice to indicate that the copy is only for exhibition display purpose and not for sale, it may also mean that the work on display is considered, to a degree, disposable [7]. That is, the artist concerned provides data and print permits to the organizer with special conditions. The condition referred to is that the work will be destroyed after the exhibition ends. The data of the works were sent by the related artist to the cloud drive provided by the organizer, to be subsequently printed by the organizer in accordance with the number and size requested by the artists. Due to the problem of limited materials available in Indonesia, the works are then uniformly printed on a specific material namely pvc board. The pvc board is chosen since it's sturdier than paper and still can be printed on with good image quality, so it won't get damaged easily in the process of moving and displaying, yet the image quality is still decent to be appreciated. Of course, this cannot accommodate all the wishes of most artists who often have their own media of choice, but this has also been agreed upon by both parties. Two artists, Anna Kedziora (Poland) and Nguyễn Thế Sơn (Vietnam) also included a video documentation as a complement to the work, as so do Jim Rammer still require one of his photographs to be printed on photograph paper as it need to expose the quality of the paper.

After all the works have been printed, the next process is the display. The display process is the same as the display process in general. The works are arranged on the floor according to the composition that has been instructed by each artist, then measured

according to the available wall size. The additional process was done when all the works that have been displayed. The room is documented (photographed) using a 360° camera so that it can be seen virtually panoramic. The camera is placed in the middle of the gallery room to get an overview of the whole exhibition space, then the camera is also placed in front of the works of each artist so that the audience who watches online can see the works on display more clearly. After the panoramic photo data is collected, the next step is to input the data into the website.

The opening was then held virtually with a pre-recorded speech, via the YouTube channel to comply with health protocols. There were absolutely no invited guests to prevent crowds in the ITB area (this is because Galeri Soemardja is located inside the ITB campus area). Discussions are also held online using the Zoom platform and can be re-watched via the Soemardja Gallery YouTube channel. A direct visit to the Soemardja Gallery can only be done if you have filled out the visit form provided online by ITB. In the extended exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo, the exhibition room can only be entered in a limited way. For the record, offline exhibition visits both at Galeri Soemardja and Selasar Sunaryo, both were carried out with due observance of the applicable health protocols.



**Figure 2** Screenshot of RT BPS 2020 virtual opening ceremony.



**Figure 3** Screenshot of RT BPS 2020 online discussion.



**Figure 4.** RT BPS 2020 extended exhibition gallery tour in Selasar Sunaryo.

### 3. FINDINGS

In contrast to the ArtJakarta exhibition [8] or other virtual exhibitions that are completely based on the internet where all rooms are created virtually, the works presented at the RT BPS 2020 exhibition can still be witnessed in person, even though they still pay attention to health protocols, as well as the policies of the Indonesian government which are currently apply. In the case of the exhibition at the Soemardja Gallery because it is located on the ITB campus, the exhibition follows the rules that are being applied at ITB.

The number of visitors was drastically reduced when compared to offline exhibitions before the pandemic. This may be because people in general still have to adapt to utilizing internet technology to the fullest. The paradigm of enjoying the exhibition means enjoying the material (artifacts) of the work with all the qualities that appear directly, of course it will be lost if we hold an exhibition in a virtual space like this. The capabilities and types of hardware, as well as different types of internet connections also contributed to enjoying the exhibition.

In the offline exhibition, it is predictable that the atmosphere of the exhibition is very quiet. On the one hand, this situation gives us free time to be able to observe each work on display optimally. On the other hand, this quiet atmosphere felt unusual. There is no ceremonial opening of the exhibition as is generally done in Indonesia, especially Bandung. There are no casual discussions that often occur after visitors leave the showroom. In the extended exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo, although there is a gallery tour for invited guests, in order to maintain physical distance, the number of guests is limited by shifts of visiting hours.

The absence of the space and its nuances are not the only thing that differentiate online from offline

exhibition. The medium that contains the image is also different by nature, one is digital and the other is having trait as an artifact. Our PC's or gadget's screen is emitting its own artificial light, when a printed photograph is passively bouncing a certain spectrum of light so we can interpret it as colours. If by mechanical reproduction, the aura of the work of art withers as Walter Benjamin suggests [9], so in this digital projection, it's not only the work of art but also the unique existence of the space (gallery) itself.

The use of a 360 panoramic camera distorts objects near the screen edge, while keeping objects in the middle of the screen rather normal. Somehow the distortion itself attracts us to drag (whether by using a mouse or by swiping the screen) the image so we can see things that were initially distorted more clearly. It's almost like things that normally appear on the side of our eyes are suddenly present in front of us and minimized. If some people choose to use a good image projector connected to their PC they can even upscaled the image, or further, projecting/simulating the whole gallery itself into their room, mimicking the atmosphere, as today's technology already allows us to do so. With this further effort, the visual presentation of the gallery is not singular anymore but rather plural, omnipresent.

Looking from the other side, the perception of scale and material awareness is also an aspect that is affected when we use cyberspace. In a real (offline) gallery, we directly experience the sensation of grandeur, awe, absorption, immerse, or other sensory experiences when dealing with works, as well as the nuances of the room where the work is displayed that surrounds us. When using a gadget, the sensation seems to fade because we seem to see through a small frame. The flat screen of the gadget eliminates the material sensation and sensory perception that we usually experience when dealing with artworks. Artworks measuring 300x400 cm on a smartphone with a screen measuring 15x8 cm, of course, will not feel as grand as the original. In this case, it is right to say both mediums have their size limit. As artwork in online exhibitions depend on gadget's size, printed photographs are limited by the size of the paper and the printer available (or enlarger, if analog photography is included).

Printed photographs have the nature of an artifact, because somehow it borrows the physic and form of the medium on which it was printed on. Thus, printed photographic works are more exclusive, they can only be seen in the gallery or space where it is displayed (unique existence). Projected photographs on the other hand are more democratic. True, we still need gadgets

to see it, but in the moment we live today, gadgets are closer to clothes, they have already become our primary needs. As long as we know the right web address (and internet connection), we can access it from anywhere we want.

Printed photographs depend on the capability of the medium on which it is printed on. Acid-free paper (or pvc board in this exhibition) specialized for photography developed to be a long lasting recorder for the image. Good chemicals with the right treatment makes film development in analog photography or the good pigment bonding in digital photography may hold the richness of its colour last long. In any way the image developed or printed, we will get exact colour in front of our eyes. This is different from the digital image that requires screen calibration in order to convey the 'right' colour. As printed photographs depend on the strength of the pigment and paper (or board), the projected photography depends on longevity of the physical memory drive that acts as storage. Digital photography is virtually unbreakable and immune to decay, but in reality it's just a projection of binary data stored in physical storage and translated into images by our gadget. Once the physical storage is broken, we can no longer access it. Luckily, like the other digital data it can be easily copied to another storage repeatedly and virtually unlimited.

The presence of the world in the frame brought by photography has also become a phenomenon that is often discussed at the beginning of the birth of photography itself. Many painters then adapt the 'cropping' phenomena in their paintings [1]. Photography is changing the way we look and how we perceive scale and dimension, and now online exhibitions take it two folds further. This photography exhibition seems to be a paradox of photography itself. It's like framing the frame, rescaling the rescaled, and flattening things that's flattened.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

RT BPS 2020 is a series of photography exhibition activities held in a hybrid manner in two venues, namely Galeri Soemardja and Selasar Sunaryo Art Space. The offline exhibition took place from 25 November to 4 December 2020 at the Galeri Soemardja FSRD-ITB and the extended exhibition was held from 7 January to 7 February 2021 at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space. The online exhibition has been open since November 25, 2020, and can still be watched today on the Galeri Soemardja website. The discussion was held on December 15, 2020, through the YouTube channel. This exhibition presents the

works of 12 artists from 7 countries, by displaying 30 titles of works.

The RT BPS 2020 exhibition, which was held in a hybrid manner, could be a new option for other art galleries to hold exhibitions during the pandemic era. This hybrid exhibition still has shortcomings in the online exhibition section, for example due to technical limitations and available peripherals, the video cannot be played, and the audience is still not used to enjoying hybrid exhibitions. The only way is to visit in person. But maybe this can be further exploited to attract audiences, if for example online exhibitions are positioned like teasers, which make people curious to visit showrooms in the real world. Apart from that, of course, the experience of exhibiting in digital spaces is still something new, especially if the works on display have a concrete form in the real world.

This version of the RT BPS 2020 digital exhibition itself has indirectly become a criticism of photography itself, or even developed into discourse. Photographic works that are generally enjoyed after being transferred to the printable medium (generally in the form of special sheets of paper), are now turned back into digital data. While printed photography still has its material form as an artefact, the online exhibition seems to dematerialize it. Online exhibition is actually a stream of data that is then rendered by our gadgets, before it can convey information as image projection. It may lack both aura and 3-dimensional information, so any spatial experience can't be fully absorbed by the audiences. But artworks are not only about image; scale, direct visual experience, and spatial experience are also the key to understanding and submerged into the artworks. The RT BPS 2020 online exhibition can still convey the idea presented by the image on the photography as well as giving the general view about the gallery, it can be good as a teaser, but it can't be a replacement for the offline exhibition, unless the artworks themselves are prepared and selected beforehand to be experienced solely within the realm of digital media. It's a good thing that RT BPS 2020 was a hybrid exhibition, so audiences still have the chance to visit it offline. Nevertheless, the process of going back and forth (rephotographed photographic works), should become an interesting phenomenon to be studied further.

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