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Revolusi! Indonesia Independent

Curated by writer Amir Sidharta and historians Bonnie Triyana, Harm Stevens, and Marion Anker, “Revolusi! Indonesia Independent” centered people and their stories during the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–49). The Revolusi, as the war is known in Indonesia, ended more than 300 years of Dutch colonial occupation in most of the archipelago. The sole remaining Dutch overseas territory was the Papua region, which was ceded to the United Nations in 1962, even though Papuans were promised an independent nation state, and later incorporated as an Indonesian province through a 1969 referendum that is still protested today. The details of the Revolusi itself have recently come under scrutiny again, with three institutions in the Netherlands jointly releasing the findings from the landmark, five-year research project “Independence, decolonization, violence and war in Indonesia, 1945–1950” less than a week after the opening of “Revolusi!”

Installation view of **TIMOTEUS ANGGAWAN KUSNO**'s *Luka dan Bisa Kubawa Berlari* (Wounds and venom I carry as I am running), 2022, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, at “Revolusi! Indonesia Independent,” Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



including evidence of the Dutch’s use of extreme violence during the conflict. In an interview about the project, lead researcher Gert Oostindie acknowledged, “we as a nation have a rosy self-image that is often at odds with how the Netherlands behaved.” As these events suggest, the processes and discussions around decolonization are ongoing, and are fraught with tensions.

Amid debates on whether historical research on such traumatic events is “woke madness” or truth-telling, the organizers of “Revolusi!” skirted the rhetoric of states and political powers, and created an empathetic display of human struggle in times of war, employing a polyphonic curatorial strategy in which the experiences of people who lived through the conflict are retold in text, sound, archival film material, photography, posters, and objects such as a mini photo album, a soldier’s shirt with bullet holes, and improvised baby clothing. The voices of lesser-known individuals were included alongside those of famous politicians, artists, filmmakers, and writers.

No display of this sort would be complete without a section on propaganda. In “Revolusi!” a chapter called “Information War” contained materials intended to motivate people to fight for Indonesian independence. Particularly fascinating were the posters skillfully designed by the collective *Seniman Indonesia Muda* (Young Indonesian Artists) that call for a South-South solidarity, as in an example from 1946–47 that reads, “Padi oentok India, bahan pakaian oentok Indonesia” (Rice for India, fabric for Indonesia). This section clearly benefited enormously from the Netherlands National Archive and other archives in the Netherlands, raising questions about how these objects got into these collections. Though the Rijksmuseum simply says that research is still

ongoing, the absence of Dutch propaganda in this section was also striking, making the display appear one-sided.

A section on modern art by Indonesian artists addressing the Revolusi followed. Sparsely populating the large room were paintings by modernist masters, such as Sudjojono’s *Portrait Pejuang* (Portrait of a warrior, 1953) as well as Affandi’s self-portrait *Peladjaran Moeka Tida’ Senang* (The dissatisfied face lesson, 1948) and Hendra Gunawan’s depiction of *Guerrillas* (1949), with the former on loan from the National Gallery of Indonesia and the latter two belonging to the Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. Works from the collection of Sukarno, the leader of the Revolusi, Indonesia’s first president, and the most prominent art patron of his time, were missing, perhaps hinting at trust issues that continue to trouble cultural relations between the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Absence also speaks volumes in the brilliant commission *Luka dan Bisa Kubawa Berlari* (Wounds and venom I carry as I am running, 2022) by artist Timoteus Anggawan Kusno. The installation is based on portraits of the governors-general of the Dutch East Indies that decorated the palace in Batavia for centuries until the end of the Revolusi, when they were brought to the Netherlands and preserved in the collection of the Rijksmuseum. Kusno radically withholds 14 of the portraits, displaying just their frames on a large, dramatically lit podium in a black room. The mysterious installation looks like a ruin, haunted by creatures, disembodied human voices, and other sounds the artist collected in Indonesia. Despite volatile debates, Kusno’s work, and “Revolusi! Indonesia Independent” more broadly, point toward the growing readiness of Dutch cultural institutions to critically face the country’s colonial past.

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