The debates surrounding the significance of Kelompok Seni Rupa Jendela (KSRJ) may be reflected in commentaries by Putu Fajar Arcana and Jim Supangkat. The exhibition was entitled Biasa (Ordinary). Putu’s (Putu Fajar Arcana, Kompas, Minggu, 24 July 2005) doubts centred around the KSRJ’s seemingly formalistic emphasis:

The works assembled were not particularly special. At the very most, the exhibition held at the Nadi Gallery 20 July – 1 August 2005 illustrate the artists’ search revolving around the world of nature and objects, akin to academic experimentations undertaken during the formative years on an artist. ¹

Although Putu remarked that the message-less and ‘quiet’ nature of the group’s works distinguish them from the general stridency of contemporary expressions, KSRJ has yet to reach a point of resolution that may affirm their place in Yogyakarta contemporary art scene. Putu went further:

Their emergence may be described analogically as water seeping from behind a wall. During a period when contemporary art in Yogyakarta is dominated by realist and surrealist styles and characterised by social criticism, the works by these KSRJ artists are not outstanding. Their works ‘seep’ through the wall to eventually whet the attention of critics and collectors. ²

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¹ Putu Fajar Arcana, “KSRJ - Air yang Merembes di Balik Tembok”, Kompas, July 24, 2005
² Ibid.
Putu recognized that these works may be located as a form of antithesis to the development of contemporary art in Yogyakarta, but he was severe in his criticism. In these works, he sees a play on scale, perspective, volume, light and dark, but alas lacking in any form of substance. He argues that the works had not been considered beyond the obvious formalist explorations, theoretical or conceptual implications associated. For example, he identifies Aifi's paintings as ones that superficially appropriate surrealistic device and compacting them into compositional tableaux, yet do not achieve any of the 'surrealistic effects'. In the works of Rudi Mantofani, he finds some respite, commenting that his use of colours may have been referenced to the artist's childhood memory growing up in Minang, Sumatra and his attitudes toward nature, yet still, do not present themselves as linguistic signs in facilitating interpretation. He concludes:

However, this does not mean Rudi's works fail as interpretative readings into nature and objects. At least they provide a respite amidst the cacophony of colours in our contemporary art. These five artists valiantly attempt to reintroduce into the scene a discursive vigor ...³

For Jim Supangkat (Mencari Bingkai Jendela, Kompas, Minggu, 31 July 2005), Putu, while prefiguring the significance of contexts, had missed the point and had failed to grasp the implications of KSRJ's practice. Emerging during the mid-1990s, KSRJ is to be seen as a reaction against the conventions of Indonesian art during the 1990s which are, emphasis on 'grand-matters', the emphasis on the social, political and cultural and anti-formalism seen mainly in Indonesian installation works of 1990s. KSRJ represented an inversion through its appropriation of the mundane, and transforming them through careful and even clinical articulation. Jim's principle focus were the works by Handiwirman. In his paintings, Handiwirman transforms everyday discards like ointment bottles, cigarette butts or cotton wool into arresting images. Jim remarked that formalism was perhaps the most powerful force that transformed 20th century modern art as artists struggle against the orthodoxy of representational art. In Indonesia, formalism is associated to developments during the 1950s and 1960s and seen antithetical to the broad need to locate art within a broader agenda of decolonization and independence, and hence dismissed by many as soulless and a mere play of forms. In this respect, the reaction against KSRJ is uncanny in its parallel to events in art history, in particular the preeminence of the politically and socially engaged Yogyakarta art in the Indonesian mythic quest of nationhood bourn out of the colonial condition. Supangkat defends the significance of formalistic investigations:

20th century, and is known as one of the dominant tendencies before the birth of the contemporary art around the 1970s. Aesthetic matters in formalism are focused on the calculation of forms. Its underlying philosophy believes that aesthetic matter, presented as it is through forms, is distant from the understanding of life, the meaning of reality, and the search for the values that are betrayed in the tradition of representing reality. Formalism, therefore, is integrally related with the abolition of representation in the artwork. This belief came to be along with the birth of the abstract art.⁴

³ bid.
Yet, Supangkat acknowledged the specter of Indonesian art history and the tendency in contemporary criticism to insist on a textual accounting of the works by the KSRJ Group. As an active artist and commentator during the 1970s, Supangkat would have understood the innate need among younger practitioners to reshape and redefine the agenda of art practices according to their shifting worldviews. The world of Indonesian art before the 1970s was predicated by a search for national and cultural identities. Artists sought ways to define modernity in relation to the contingencies of the youthful nation, its struggle with notions of progressiveness and the questions of rootedness and authenticity. Western art provide a range of formal devices that may be readily mobilized towards these diverse aims. As such, while the ‘isms’ of modern Western art were well regarded, its stylistic forms that came in a deluge rather than in sequential terms, afforded themselves as a reservoir of formal possibilities, open to quotes, adaptations and appropriations, made coherent through contexts and prevailing social and political debates. This provides a historical framework that relativised and decentred modernity according to locales and their varied conditions, described by Supangkat through the coinage of the term ‘multi-modernism’. Supangkat in the 1970s became active with a group called the New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, 1974). It was through this Movement that Supangkat was weaned into the question of a cultural agency, one that emphasized the articulation of a visual language referential to contemporary challenges by incorporating aspects of Indonesian popular culture and the everyday. It necessitated the task of realigning discourse towards the problematics of nation, its past and destiny, so as to forge a lineage of historiography – from Raden Saleh to S. Sudjojono and beyond – particularistic in its emphasis and regard for Indonesian-ness. As such, New Art Movement stood on a precipice of the contemporary, informed by discursive developments and meanderings. That sense of ‘accumulation’ indeed may be emphasized and mobilized to insist from KSRJ a historical continuity where the image may be read in relation to perceived stability of artistic language. Yet perhaps for Supangkat, it is the sense of ‘meandering’ that simultaneously offers into the reading of KSRJ new inflections while retaining an indubitable link to history. Supangkat makes clear of the need to rationalize KSRJ from historical perspectives:

Seen from the viewpoint of the history of art, the works of the KSRJ Art Group could be taken as the harbinger of a new artistic development. The tendency of the group to go against the mainstream reflects the efforts to find a new orientation amid the growing trends. Therefore, the tendency of the KSRJ Art Group must be analyzed by observing the important signs of the preceding art developments.  

5 Jim Supangkat, Ibid.
Critical to Supangkat’s call is the need to unpack and reconsider aspects of Indonesian art history that had become entrenched as stable or enduring narratives. A key point of attack among critics about KSRJ is the group’s lack of reference towards prevailing contemporary tendencies, in particular those emerging from Yogyakarta. This view is art historically informed, referenced to the regard for the art of Yogyakarta and Bandung as dialectical polars in the quest for Indonesian modernity and national identity. Although there are a range of perspectives both analytical and nuanced, development in Yogyakarta from the 1930s to the 1960s is generally associated to nationalist and other popular struggles as well as the incumbency of modern painter S. Sudjojono as a nationalist, while at the same time Bandung had remained committed to formalist experimentations informed by internationalist movements and mediated by a Western-type academy Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) and their western instructors. The emphasis on “morality and honesty” is often assigned to Yogyakarta art. According to Supangkat:

The Yogyakarta School emphasized the morality and honesty aspects as found in the thinking of Soedjojono. Because of the faith in morality, the tendencies apparent in the Yogyakarta School were those themes of the people and the community, while the belief in honesty/feelings/emotion as a source of truth gave rise to expressive paintings. Indonesian-ness and society constituted important issues within this tendency.  

6 Jim Supangkat, The Emergence of Indonesian Modernism and its Background in Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, Japan Foundation, 1995, p.212
This tendency to impose Yogyakarta art with a form of morality bound "social contract" may be art historical in nature. Yet its residual impact seen through the manner KSRJ works were critiqued by their detractors is apparent. Several critics re-mobilised Yogyakarta-Bandung dichotomy by invoking 'social and political themes' and 'non-representationality' categories in Indonesian art, hence locating the group in contrast against 'propaganda art'. Art critic Agus Dermawan T summarily dismissed the works KSRJ describing them as 'lazy', 'insolent' and derivative. Writing in 2000, Agus described KSRJ's practice as a form of disruption, a gimmick against the perceived commodification of art and even in doing so, is trapped into a condition of decadence it is trying to critique.

KSRJ's formal and conceptual positions – in as far as these range of comments above – are framed contextually in relation to established art historical positions and reductive mapping of Indonesian art that insisted a singularity of Yogyakarta art as a conceptual proposition. KSRJ's multivaried practices are not underlined by manifestos and declarations. Their practices are defined by individuated approaches unencumbered by common philosophical perspectives that allows for critical examination in ways that are direct and overt. What is apparent is the artists’ distinct focus on formal constituents of their art, their clinical approach to materials, processes and physical outcomes. The result is works that are distinct in their poetic gestures yet ambivalent in the manner of content. These interplay of elements and materials entice as points of entry, but more often than not leave the readers with very little clue to the artistic intent. Thus, we are tasked to return to Putu's lament of the message-less works. How may we regard this apparent 'limitation'? Rizki A. Zaelani proposes that the problem must be approached as a question linked to reception. Although he started by asking "Conceptually, what characterizes the work of this group?", Rizki argued that the rigidity of our questioning needs to be re-examined: "it is us who just have to alter the questions." This involves the need for us to define the contextual no longer in broad ‘national’ socio-political terms, but rather through the subjectivity of the individual artist. Further, the artwork as independent object demands a viewer to read them as metaphors induced by inflecting the potentials of one sign with another, each ‘transcending’ its iconographic or art historical limits. In doing so, elements of a given work are to be regarded in their connotative possibilities, built through complex game of associations. For Enin Suprianto (writing in this publication), who uses the term 'allusion' to describe this dynamic interplay of signs, it is obvious that this interpretative play is induced through a manner of articulation that resists the disclosure or even a formulation of content. However, a crucial question for him is the reason and manner in which this strategy involving ‘allusion’ emerged consistently across the practices of the various artists. Here, Enin identifies ethnicity of the artists as an important determinant. For him, their Minang identity is crucial in shaping a common diasporic bonding while they maintain their practices in the predominantly Javanese Yogyakarta. Enin argues that the propensity towards ‘allusion’ can be defined in relation to the linguistic sensibilities of the Minang that is apparent in their use of aphorisms, proverbs or similes in communicating ideas and perspectives. This system of allusion however, does not reproduced a series of defined codes, but rather one that is strategically deployed as a contemporary play of signs - 'opening up possibilities'.

7 Berkarya dan Bermain di Era Seni Kontemporer, Sinar Harapan, Jakarta, 2 August 2006, see http://www.sinarharapan.co.id/berita/0208/06/hib02.html
8 Ibid.
9 Rizki A. Zaelani, The Ordinary: KSRJ Group of Artists, Today, in Biasa, Nadi Gallery, 2005, p.15
Here, we may return to the question of historical burden. In Supangkat’s regard for Indonesia’s modernity – one developed through the context of colonization, engagements with the West, formation of an independent nation, and the contingencies of the identity – he describes the process of transfer, adaptation and localisation of Western forms as one that was informed by a prevailing indigenous attitude towards craft and art making. Supangkat deploys the Javanese term Kagunan to account this specific sensibility defined in relation to characteristics such as among others, ‘cleverness’, ‘intelligence’, ‘beneficial’ and ‘outpouring of sensibility’. He explained that two important aspects were deployed in modern art, ‘morality and lyricism’, the former linked to developments in Yogyakarta and the latter to Bandung. In light of KSRJ, Kagunan as a concept is simultaneously illuminating in our regard to ethnicity and cultural construction, and at the same time problematic for its metonymic deployment in relation to nation. From the explorations in preceding paragraphs, I had attempted to ask if these theoretical models or categories are limited in their capacity to project later developments such as the emergence of KSRJ. The emergence of KSRJ provides a broader opportunity to revisit assumptions and ideas pertaining to the way we understand Indonesian modern art of the past, in particular while we seek to explain events in relation to dynamics within categories of nation and even ethnicity, how do we acknowledge the very force of cosmopolitanism that operates differentially at the various stages of modern history, as it simultaneously transforms and entrenches as range of attitudes and sensibilities.

10 Jim Supangkat, Op cit., p. 206
Batu Duduk (Sitting Stones). Handiwirman Saputra
2007, Brass, Resin, Bronze Wire, Stone, 330cm x 330cm x 3 cm