

BRIAN ARNOLD

Book Review: *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*

Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia by Karen Strassler. Duke University Press, 2020. 368 pp./\$109.95 (hb), \$29.95 (sb).



IMAGE 1. Documentation from the *Keren dan Beken* (Cool and Famous) installation at the Jogja Biennale (2003); courtesy Indonesian Visual Arts Archive.

In 2003, the photography and media arts collective Ruang MES 56¹ took the Jogja Biennale in Indonesia by storm with their photographic performance of *Keren dan Beken*

1. Ruang MES 56 is an artist collective based in Yogyakarta. The collective was founded by some of the first students graduating with degrees in Fine Art Photography from ISI Yogyakarta (Institut Seni Indonesia—Indonesian Institute of Art). Ruang MES 56 has gone on to international acclaim, including a 2017 exhibition at the Foam Museum in Amsterdam. There is an excellent, bilingual study of Ruang MES 56 published by Indo Art Now: *Cerita sebuah ruang: menghidupi ekspektasi: Membaca fotografi kontemporer Indonesia melalui praktik Ruang MES 56* (Stories of a Space: Living Expectations: Understanding Indonesian Contemporary Photography Through Ruang MES 56 Practices) (Jakarta: Indo Art Now, 2015).

(Cool and Famous). The collective created an experimental photo happening in which they set up a portrait studio in the exhibition space and invited anyone visiting the gallery to pose for a photo with a member of the collective. Two copies of each photo were printed, one for the participant and one for hanging in the gallery. This piece was less about the resulting photographs and more about the performance and interaction. The photography, in essence, was a script for a performance, an image as an event. And this photographic performance asked important questions about the nature of photography, authorship, and how these relate to social interactions and constructions.

In 2014, Joko Widodo, or Jokowi, was elected President of the Republic of Indonesia, in the first truly democratic election in the nation, and the first with no political or economic connections to previous administrations. Jokowi was a grassroots politician from Central Java who came to prominence quickly, in part because of his media strategies and a new generation of young people and voters with cellphones and social media at their fingertips, and he was thus often compared to former United States



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IMAGE 2. *Untitled (Jay Subyakto with his camera, and his photograph of Jokowi and the crowd at the “Two Finger Salute” Rock Concert, as circulated on Twitter) (2014) by Jay Subyakto; courtesy Karen Strassler.*

President Barack Obama. And in many ways, Jokowi appeared to hold all of the promises of *reformasi*, the student-led movement that led to the fall of thirty-year dictator President Suharto.² While seemingly unrelated to *Keren dan Beken*, Jokowi masterfully utilized public interaction with images to challenge cultural and political norms, creating events and happenings in which the participants were also the authors, using pictures to create new scripts for Indonesia and its experiment with democracy.

In her newest book, *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*, Karen Strassler identifies a cultural phenomenon at play in Indonesian politics and cultural discourse, something she calls an *image-event*. Strassler, an associate professor of anthropology at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, focuses her work on photography and the media, using images as a way to enter and decode cultural patterns and identities. Her first book, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (2010) was well received in Indonesian and Southeast Asian Studies circles, winning the Gregory Bateson Prize for Cultural Anthropology, the Harry J. Benda Prize for Southeast Asian Studies, and the John Collier Prize for Visual Anthropology. It was a brilliant study of vernacular photography, specifically using photography as a tool for understanding Indonesia during the Suharto era through *reformasi*. *Demanding Images* continues where that book left off, providing a study of photography, images, and the media in the early years of a democratic Indonesia. While developed from a different perspective and vocabulary than the work of Ruang MES 56, Strassler identifies something quite similar to *Keren dan Beken*, and has found an anthropological methodology that studies mediated happenings in which different social constructions collide.

Demanding Images is a collection of essays, with an introduction that defines the primary assumptions of the book. Each of the articles functions as a completed piece in and of itself, but collectively they reveal a tremendous amount about the challenges and conflicts that face Indonesia today, specifically in regard to mass media and religion, and how both of these influence political and public discourse. Before delving more closely into Strassler's text, it is worth a brief look at some of the defining attributes of Indonesia. Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world today, just behind the US.³ It is the third largest democracy, again just behind the US, and has the world's largest Muslim population.⁴ Indonesia is also one of the world's largest consumers of social media.⁵

In the introduction, "The Eventfulness of Images," Strassler defines her primary concerns, specifically her idea of the *image-event*. The basics of her argument are that

2. Suharto came to power in 1967, emerging from a cloud of controversy and destruction, and maintained his position as President of Indonesia until 1998.

3. Information taken from United States Census Bureau data published on July 1, 2021, "US Census Bureau Current Population," United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov/popclock/print.php?component=counter.

4. For more information visit USINDO, the United States–Indonesia Society, <https://usindo.org/information-on-u-s-and-indonesia/about-indonesia>.

5. "Number of social network users in selected countries in 2020 and 2025," *Statista*, Jan. 28, 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/278341/number-of-social-network-users-in-selected-countries/#:~:text=China%20is%20the%20biggest%20social,million%20current%20social%20media%20users.

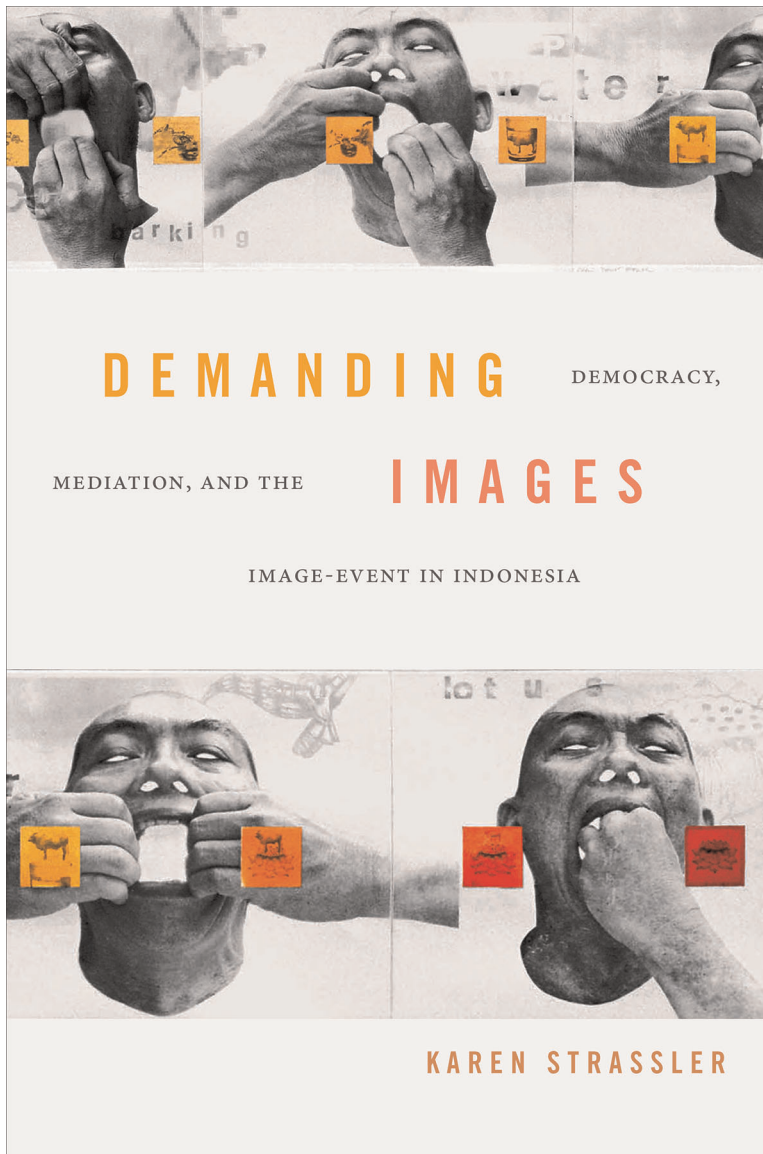


IMAGE 3. Cover of *Demanding Images* (featuring artwork by Javanese artist FX Harsono); courtesy Karen Strassler and Duke University Press.

images are like scripts, providing coded and controversial possibilities to play out in the media and politics. Or in her own words, “An ‘image-event’ is a political process in which an image (or a constellation of related images) crystalizes otherwise inchoate and dispersed imagings within a discrete and mobile visible form that becomes available for scrutiny, debate, and play as it circulates in public” (13). The image, or a discursive exchange of images in a mediated environment, is a catalyst for a social reaction, not unlike *Keren dan Beken*, encouraging all participants and communities to confront and question the construction of societal boundaries, while balancing digital normalization

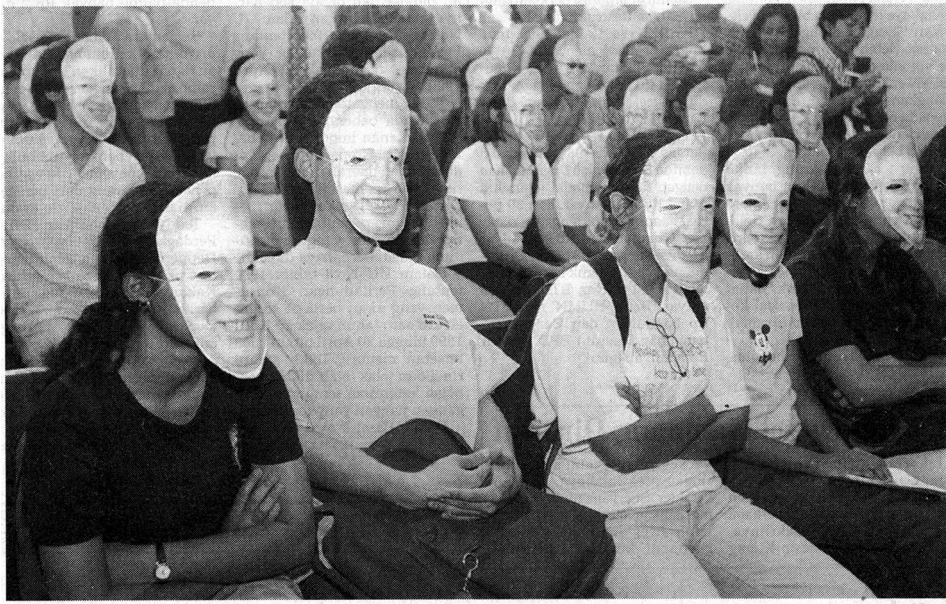


IMAGE 4. *Untitled (Students attending a reformasi photo exhibition)* (1998) by unknown photographer; courtesy Karen Strassler.

with the conservative roots of colonialism and Islam. Strassler continues: “Images traverse social, linguistic, and other barriers, and thus are capable of drawing the shared attention of people who may occupy very different social positions and spheres of discourse” (13).

Each of the subsequent chapters provides a case study in image-events. In basic form, the essays pick up where *Refracted Images* ends. Strassler’s first book ends with the fall of Suharto during the *reformasi* era. *Demanding Images* begins with the beginnings of democracy in the nation, and a push for rapid social evolution. Image production and distribution was an essential part of the *reformasi* movement. Armed with cameras, the students were able to record the events and demonstrations that led to the end of Suharto’s dictatorship. The pictures were distributed in leaflets and exhibitions, in a manner the state, so previously dominating of the media, could no longer control. The student pictures were considered authentic, a true representation of the events and the will of the people. With his media savvy and progressive ideology, Jokowi was able to embody many of the goals of *reformasi*.

The opening chapter, “Face Value,” addresses some of the public drama that surrounded the end of Suharto’s regime, and looks at the iconopolitics of the face (or in Indonesian, *wajah*). The essay begins with discussions about money and includes a courtroom photo performance (not unlike *Keren dan Beken*) in which a group of protestors confronted Suharto’s mechanisms of power and the law, all masked as the president himself. Strassler’s discussion maps out complicated questions about images, authenticity, and sociopolitical commerce.



"SOEHARTO" DI PENGADILAN — Sekitar 28 aktivis Forum Diskusi Mahasiswa Sastra (FDMS) Universitas Indonesia memakai topeng berwajah mantan Presiden Soeharto, saat menghadiri sidang tindak pidana ringan di Pengadilan Negeri Jakarta Selatan, Senin (21/6). "HM Soeharto" dihukum membayar denda Rp 2.500/orang karena melakukan aksi Happening Art di Jembatan Semanggi, Jumat pekan lalu. **Berita halaman 15**

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IMAGE 5. Students appear in court wearing Suharto masks. From "HM Soeharto Dihukum Denda" (Suharto Sentenced with a Fine), *Kompas*, June 22, 1999; courtesy Karen Strassler and Duke University Press.

Chapter 2, "The Gender of Transparency," opens some dark histories in Indonesia. Chinese citizens in Indonesia have often been victimized in times of despair, and were again during *reformasi*, as many Chinese women were raped and tortured during the Jakarta demonstrations, and usually without consequences for the offenders. Strassler's text questions the debate surrounding the atrocities committed against these women, specifically addressing the imagery used to report and justify these abuses, to whitewash these crimes beneath the greater good of democracy. Strassler offers a bold critique of these tragedies during *reformasi* and suggests that democracy in Indonesia cannot truly succeed with the sort of censorship and denial that accompanied these crimes, that such a selective use and abuse of images undermines the basic need for transparency that helped create the social movements that led to the fall of Suharto.

Laws regarding pornography in Indonesia are quite different from what we understand in the West, and Muslim majorities in legislating bodies have successfully outlawed its production and distribution. Chapters 3 and 4, "The Scandal of Exposure" and "Naked Effects," look at recent large-scale public debates on sexual morality, analyzing the roles of the government, religion, social media, and digital forensics in creating them. Perhaps most interesting of these revolved around an installation by internationally

regarded, controversial artist Agus Suwage.⁶ His 2005 installation *Pink Swing Park* stirred together popular culture and idolatry, the Biblical Garden of Eden, and sexuality in a way that created a remarkable outcry.⁷ The installation featured digital photographs of Anjasmara—a celebrity in Indonesia, with a career as a model and soap opera star—with model Isabel Yahya, both seemingly nude (both models claimed not to be nude, to defend their careers from the public outcry), surrounding a rickshaw carriage left in the gallery, painted pink. Juxtaposing the popular figures and sex symbols with the rickshaw—itsself suggesting a more modest, working-class Indonesia—questioned morality, class, and the media, and how these things mix in contemporary Indonesia. The exhibition infuriated some proponents of the Islamic political movements across the islands, resulting in public protests, extensive media dialogues and debates, and recording-setting attendance for the exhibition before the curator was forced to end it early. No stranger to controversy, Suwage found new claims to fame and forced Indonesia into a public confrontation questioning morality, ethics, and popular culture, with the



IMAGE 6. Posting of Munir on the streets of Yogyakarta; courtesy Karen Strassler.

6. For more information see the Agus Suwage profile on the Tyler Rollins Fine Art website at www.trfineart.com/artist/agus-suwage/#artist-works.

7. The controversy of *Pink Swing Park* received international attention, even warranting an article in Reuters. Sunanda Creagh, "Indonesian artist Suwage takes on porn law, censorship," Reuters, September 28, 2009, www.reuters.com/article/us-art-indonesia-suwage/indonesian-artist-suwage-takes-on-porn-law-censorship-idINTREj8SoFE20090929.

image functioning, Strassler argues, as a backdrop and script for these debates. In citing the work of anthropologist and religious studies scholar James Hoestery, Strassler concludes, “the public debate over pornography was ‘a theatrics of national morality out on the public stage’” (135).

The closing study, “Street Signs,” looks at graffiti art in the city of Yogyakarta. Anyone familiar with the city knows that its graffiti is a defining characteristic, and Strassler’s essay opens readers’ eyes as to the political and cultural influences at play on the streets, decoding the signs and signifiers across the urban surface. She focuses on particular patterns, specifically the repetition of Munir’s (Munir Said Thalib)⁸ likeness on the city’s streets. An icon of progressive, democratic ideals, his image came to signify essential attributes of Indonesia’s experiment in democracy, and the struggle for the control of images and ideas in the public sphere that lay at the heart of it. The essay looks at the development and implementation of laws regulating the use of images in public spaces and those that defend advertising on the streets. These new laws undermined the open debates long considered an essential part of the graffiti art found across Yogyakarta and highlight the growing conflict between consumerism and political and artistic expression.

Collectively, the essays in *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia* pose interesting and challenging questions about the nature of images, how they function in public discourse, and how they can shape and manipulate democracy. The proliferation of images we all experience today necessitate the kind of investigation and scrutiny Strassler offers, and her analysis of political and social conflict in Indonesia extends well beyond the nation’s borders, providing a mirror for understanding many of the sociopolitical debates we experience in the US and even globally. In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, influential French philosopher and artist Guy Debord recognized the potential for images to consume social and political discourse, and in many ways Strassler illustrates the consequence of the media proliferation Debord anticipated, all amplified in the age of social media: “The public eye is increasingly pluralized and distracted by the sheer volume, speed, and diversity of circulating messages diffused across multiple, intersecting channels” (17).

Since 1992, my own professional work has straddled two worlds, between fine art photography and Southeast Asian Studies. I’ve taught photography around the world (though more extensively in the US and Indonesia), worked with two different nonprofit organizations dedicated to advancing academic and artistic connections between the US and Indonesia, and held academic appointments in prestigious art schools and Southeast Asian Studies programs. Karen Strassler is highly regarded in Indonesian studies, and I’ve long wished that her work would cross over and connect with more people interested in photography and media studies. Although her focus is Indonesia, her ideas and theories

8. Munir Said Thalib was a human rights activist in Indonesia, and was assassinated in 2004. Basic information on his life and work is available on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munir_Said_Thalib.



IMAGE 7. *Untitled (Jokowi as puppet)* (c. 2014) by unknown photographer; courtesy Karen Strassler and Duke University Press.

have incredible depth and should be relevant to a larger audience critically engaged with photography and visual culture, those actively trying to grapple with the complexity of images within our social and political experience. ■

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