

Karen Strassler. *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. 376 pp.

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Karen Strassler's first book, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*, traces the history of popular practices and aesthetics of photography in Java, spanning the late colonial era to the present. Upon further reveal, however, the book is much more ambitious and political in its intention. *Refracted Visions* is about the cultivation of visual, technological, and political norms and attachments that allowed the state to identify individuals as state subjects, but, more importantly, allowed individuals to recognize themselves as modern Indonesians. As an ethnography of popular culture, art history, and social history, the book is rare, even unique in the field of Indonesian studies. Perhaps the most likely analytical comparisons that can be made would be Ann Stoler's work on memory, race, and desire in the late colonial era,¹ and Rudolf Mrázek's Wittgensteinian account² of late colonial modernity as a dreamscape of technology.³ *Refracted Visions* satisfies a gap in the literature of Asian art history and technological studies by charting the slow and formative impact of photography as a distinct enframing device for Indonesian identity.

The triadic relationship between state, citizen, and a foreign element (the camera-object, the Chinese photographer) as it played out in the technological climb towards perfect identification takes on a collaborative tone in *Refracted Visions*. The book exposes modern statecraft's dependence on asserting the gaze of the state, the complicity of ordinary people in maintaining the hold of the state's recognition of their selves, and the necessarily mediating and mediated role of minority Indonesian Chinese citizens engaged in photography. The interests of the state and the individual are both represented in the belief that "Yes, the photo is me. I am that image"; a set of statements that has immense cultural connotations in a place such as Java, perhaps the island most culturally and politically identified with the nation-state. Without troubling the distance between Javanese and Indonesian identity, Java has time and time again been the place where people gathered and events of historical import were recorded. Culturally dominant Java set the standard for the rest of the country to follow, a trope that Suharto's New Order was not reticent about exploiting. Strassler's choice of fieldwork location made ethnographic and pragmatic sense—going into the center of the center (Yogyakarta as cultural center of Java and the center of student activism in the late 1990s) in order to interrogate the production and maintenance of normality and nationality.

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

² Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³ Indeed, Strassler's dissertation had made the rounds amongst more than a few of Jakarta and Yogyakarta's intellectuals. It was not uncommon to hear someone (usually a young scholar or former activist) adopt an enthusiastic tone of voice to ask if one had read Strassler's work on Indonesian photography at events to do with history, art, cultural studies, media, and technology.

For an historical and ethnographic project on the social significance of photography, Strassler's timing was fortuitous. Strassler was already at her fieldwork site in November 1998, following the economic collapse triggered by the regional Asian Crisis of 1997 and a series of ongoing political crises that pitted the old guard of Suharto's New Order dictatorship against a rising wave of popular politics, student activism, and religious, separatist, and ethnic violence across the archipelago. Marshall McLuhan's worn adage—"the medium is the message," conjuring a futuristic and technologized society where all communication had been rendered transparent as mediation, medium, and idea became one—appeared relevant once more. Photography became a powerful tool for *Reformasi*-minded individuals to redress past silences, with charged photographs appearing in the mass media and in numerous exhibitions and alternative venues. The book is thus divided by a back-and-forth motion with this fieldwork *time* of photographic hope and transparency at the center (indeed the *Reformasi* chapter is located in the middle of the book)—a motion that illustrates John Berger's insight on how the photograph works upon memory in a radial rather than linear fashion. The book takes up public and private photography, archival and contemporary photography, and the politics of the nation in the present and the past. It maintains a conceptual momentum as well; six chapters moving steadily from the most popular and detached to the most personal and political of photography's potentials.

Refracted Visions is not an easy book, for all its clear language and judicious ethnography. The book is visually beautiful, each page printed in full color, with hundreds of photographs, archival and ethnographic. (Readers of academic titles will recognize this visuality as a gift, one funded by a special grant from the Getty Foundation to Duke University Press.) The book demands that the reader understand "refraction" as a pattern, an analytical symmetry and web that obscures and is fragile inasmuch as its material hardness holds shape. Thus, we read about some of the most horrific and important political events in twentieth-century Indonesian history (for example, the anti-communist killings of 1965–66, the Petrus "mysterious shootings" and public display of corpses in the 1980s, and the anti-Chinese riots and student demonstrations in 1998) through this refraction, a quality of the lens and its resultant photographic artifact that personalizes politics and draws a clear connection between the epicenter and the impacts felt at the margins.

In using the idea of "refraction," Strassler has produced both an optic and an elegant metaphor for viewing the heterogeneous developments of Indonesian identity, from its colonial past, through the stultifying and ambivalent uniformity of the New Order, to the startling and at times transcendent practices of present day Indonesians. John Berger's much-read treatise, *Ways of Seeing*,⁴ has its mark in this book; where Berger shows how female nakedness is dressed as the female nude (and therefore not bared or transparent, but made into a sight) in our coded and historicized gaze, Strassler is boldly and curatorially selective in making her claim that the deviant details of everyday life are documents worth considering in a book about national modernity. Siting her study in the vernacular, the amateurish, and the minor, Strassler explores the materiality and indexicality of the photograph through the self-consciously exotic postcard images of Beautiful Indonesia (an aesthetic descendant of

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Company and Penguin Books, 1972).

Mooie Indië painting and salon photography conventions), the expedient services of failing photo studios, the personal archives of ordinary men and women, and the identity cards that mark every citizen. Through these forms, Indonesia and Indonesians are staged and circulated.

One of the greatest contributions that the book makes is its sensitive and sophisticated presentation of Chinese Indonesians. In the absence of critical race discourse in Indonesia (or in mainstream Indonesian studies for that matter), Strassler's contribution is especially noteworthy. As Raden Kartini herself was modern at the turn of the century, with her well-documented love of the keepsakes produced by the camera, so, too, were the photographers behind the camera. Strassler tackles the deflected and often absent fact that many of Indonesia's first photographers and photo-studio owners were ethnically Chinese. Does Indonesian photography's "foreign" history result from its Western and thereby unquestionably modern heritage? Or is it the result of its dissemination and reproduction as an essential part of popular culture in the hands of that most "other" and yet familiar stranger, the Chinese in their midst? The coupling of "the stranger and the camera" produces destabilizing thoughts that reflect attitudes toward technological prowess and ethnic minorities; both the camera-object and the foreign-figure transmit the modern, both emit the foreign, both repel and attract. It is this peculiar sense of attraction and repulsion in the modern experience of technology that Rosalind Morris has described so well in her history of Southeast Asian photography.⁵ Strassler extends the lure of the camera to the *transnational* and *cosmopolitan* qualities of Chinese-Indonesian identities and photographers: the blurring and doubling in our minds of what these words describe—the camera or the Chinese bogeyman—is purposeful to Strassler's argument (p. 27). Unlike works that crowd the page with reference to Chinese ethnicity and culture as cause rather than effect, and which, therefore, often fail at generating new analyses of why and how Chinese Indonesian identity is problematized beyond clichés of cultural hybridity or lack thereof, the first half of the book introduces you to individuals who are very much products (effects) of their time. There is the early entrepreneur of Indies photography Tan Gwat Bing, out on an excursion to a Javanese village on his bicycle; almost a century later there is Jack, nature lover and amateur photographer, out on a similar jaunt; and finally there is Laura and her father, acting out *Reformasi* in the studio. Strassler deftly shows how early associations of excess visuality with the cultural proclivities of Chinese eventually made way for more widespread national acceptance of visualizing and materializing vision everywhere, every ritual and eventful moment. By the time we get to Strassler's discussion of wedding and birthday photos, a delightful extension of John Pemberton's analysis of the ritualized announcements that characterized New Order weddings,⁶ the change is complete. An equivalence has been made between photography and individual (Javanese, Indonesian) memories. And so, too, selves circulate through their *dokumentasi* (documentation), with one photograph always gesturing to its place within a more complete and ongoing "paper trail" (p. 206).

⁵ See *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Rosalind Morris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁶ John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

The quirky final chapter is the apex of Strassler's argument. All elements collide in the figure of Noorman, the mystic, messianic, and undyingly nationalist. Noorman's cut and paste revisionist history denouncing Suharto as the usurper of Sukarno's rightful place and return resembles a cross between Jasper Johns's found-object art, and a fantasy graphic novel. His mission to spread the word of god (who is clearly on the side of Sukarno) in the form of his little yellow books is a photocopier's dream. The anthropologist has met her match in this fellow archivist and co-conspirator of counter-narrative, whose love of documentation upsets all convention of truth and transparency in the medium.

In her book (p. 60), Strassler recalls that many of her interlocutors shake their heads to say, "Indonesians are still ...": still unmodern, still unlearned about the importance of fixity, the power of indexicality contained in the photograph, and the symbolic significance of the document. On the contrary, much of what *Refracted Visions* says contains the opposite thought. Indonesians are aware of the thrall of photography, the secret thrill of documentation, the captivating eye of the camera that places the national "I" in attendance on the scene, anytime, anywhere, forever and ever, into a limited past and unlimited future. Much of this positioning is play, some of it historical witnessing, and some of it revisionist and manipulative. The author ends by suggesting that in the digital age, photographic and identity practices will continue to change, increase, and accelerate, but that the hold of the photograph endures, materializing elsewhere as refracted memory and political trace that might, at the point of a fragile center, finally shatter uncontrollably.

Reviewer's note: As this essay was being prepared for press, I learned that Karen Strassler was awarded the Harry J. Benda Prize in Southeast Asian Studies by the Association for Asian Studies for *Refracted Visions*. My congratulations to the author for her well-deserved recognition.