Negotiating Symbolic Authority: Public Sculpture, Spatial Contestation, and Post-Reformasi Indonesia

Program Penelitian, Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, dan Inovasi (PPMI) · FSRD ITB 2026

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Abstract

The 1998 Reformasi widened contestation over symbolic legitimacy in Indonesian public space. This article examines disputes over public sculpture and how divergent interpretations relate to social, material and institutional responses. A qualitative documentary comparison operates at two levels: public-art configurations in Bandung, Yogyakarta and Jakarta, and nine episodes of contestation across Indonesia, including two in Jakarta. Assessments invoke artistic, religious, moral, cultural, historical, budgetary and procedural claims, with outcomes ranging from retention to relocation or dismantling. Physical alterations do not necessarily result from public opposition. Bringing Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space into conversation with Jacques Rancière's politics of visibility, the article develops a *symbolic contestation circuit* comprising five analytical components: *authoritative inscription*, *public exposure*, *counter-reading*, *dissensus and mobilisation*, and *material-institutional resolution*. The framework shows how symbolic authority is negotiated through varied, non-linear relationships among artworks, sites, institutions, media and publics.

Keyword: *public sculpture; symbolic authority; social tensions; spatial contestation; post-Reformasi Indonesia; Southeast Asia*

Introduction

Following the 1998 Reformasi, democratisation, decentralisation and media openness widened the range of actors involved in commissioning and evaluating public sculpture. Beyond artistic form, these works make histories, identities and public values visible within shared urban spaces. Disputes may arise over whose memories are represented, whether a sculpture suits its site and which institutions have the authority to decide.

Previous studies have examined monuments, urban identity and public-art practices, but fewer comparative accounts connect initial legitimacy, public encounter, counter-interpretations, mobilisation and material outcomes across Indonesian sites. This research asks how changes in symbolic authority since Reformasi have shaped contestation over public sculpture and why disputes have generated different responses.

The framework brings Henri Lefebvre's production of space into dialogue with Jacques Rancière's politics of visibility and dissensus. It examines spatial practices, claims to public legitimacy and the unequal standing of actors. Its principal contribution is the symbolic contestation circuit: an analytical framework, not a fixed sequence through which every artwork must pass.

Research Method

This qualitative documentary study compares two related levels. Level 1 analyses three city configurations: Bandung (artistic and procedural legitimacy), Yogyakarta (curatorial mediation through JSSP #5), and Jakarta (contrasting outcomes involving Getah Getih and Barry's Dream). Level 2 examines nine documented disputes across Indonesia, including the two Jakarta cases. Cases were selected where competing legitimacy claims and event chronologies could be reconstructed.

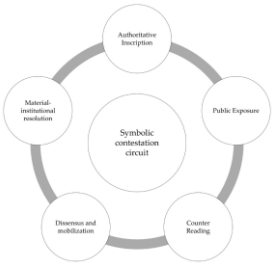


Figure 1. Symbolic contestation circuit



Figure 2. Two-level comparative documentary research design.

Sources include academic literature, institutional and curatorial archives, national and local news, recorded statements by relevant actors, and online visual documentation. The main period is 2009–2026; earlier monuments provide historical context.

Analysis proceeds in three steps: (1) reconstructing each episode's chronology; (2) coding the five interconnected components of the symbolic contestation circuit; and (3) comparing competing claims, mobilisation and documented outcomes across cases. Sources were assessed for provenance, dates, speakers' positions and consistency. No new primary interviews or field observations were conducted.

Importantly, the removal, relocation or deterioration of an artwork was not attributed to public opposition without sufficient evidence.



Figure 3. Public sculpture and contested artistic legitimacy in Bandung. (a) Diskamtam "Tangan" (2016), Jalan L.L.R.E. Martadinata; (b) Cendekiawan by Ketut Winata, formerly located at the Cihampelas–Wastukancana intersection.



Figure 4. Contested public sculpture in Jakarta. (a) Getah Getih by Joko Dwi Avianto, Bundaran HI (2018); (b) Barry's Dream by Edy Chaniago, Taman Menteng (2009–2010).

Discussion & Result

BANDUNG Patung Diskamtam "Tangan" and Patung Cendekiawan generated questions about artistic quality, authorship, siting and procedure.

YOGYAKARTA JSSP #5 demonstrates curation and mediation; visitor interactions and repairs do not automatically indicate symbolic opposition.

JAKARTA Objections to the figure and location of Barry's Dream preceded its relocation. Getah Getih, however, was dismantled after its temporary display and material deterioration; criticism alone does not explain removal.

NINE EPISODES Six overlapping frameworks concerned religion, bodily morality, cultural representation, budgets, political genealogy and legal procedures. Outcomes varied: Tiga Mojang and the Jayandaru figures were removed after objections; Speed Jokowi remained installed; Tugu Zapin/Tarian Rakyat continued under review.

Conclusion

Symbolic authority over public sculpture has become more openly contested since Reformasi, although actors have unequal influence over decisions. The five-part symbolic contestation circuit connects initial authorisation, public exposure, counter-reading, dissensus and mobilisation, and documented responses without assuming an inevitable causal sequence.

An artwork's relocation or dismantling cannot automatically be attributed to opposition. Each outcome requires a corroborated chronology and evidence about institutional decisions.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS Public institutions should document authorship, procurement, curatorial rationale, site selection, funding, expected duration, maintenance and reasons for altering artworks. Proposed mediation mechanisms are analytical recommendations, not tested interventions.

LIMITATIONS Uneven secondary documentation restricts causal claims. The findings provide contextual explanation rather than statistical generalisation. Further archival, interview-based and cross-national research could assess their relevance elsewhere in Southeast Asia.