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ARAHMAIANI, *Nation for Sale*, 1996, installation and performance, boxes, photographs, toy guns, military toys, soil, water, medicine, dimensions variable, Photograph Manit Sriwanichpoom.



Flaudette May V. Datuin

Passing through fire

Pain and transformation in the art of Arahmaiani

In Arahmaiani's work *Burning Body – Burning Country (II)*, 1999, shown at the March 1999 exhibition and conference 'Women Imaging Women: Home, Body, Memory' in Manila, she starkly called attention to the pain and violence inflicted on her people in post-Suharto Indonesia. In this installation and performance Arahmaiani painted tortured and fragmented female body parts on a dark and frenetic background and harnessed the power of her voice to dramatise her country's state of 'total chaos, as if heading towards total destruction'.

By focusing on the grief and the suffering of large numbers of people, Arahmaiani (also known as Yani) does not wish to wallow in the aesthetics of victimisation, or in the exposure of violence and violation for its own sake. Rather, by recoding her voice and her body as sites, not only of repression and control, but also of liberation, the artist transforms her personal grief into action, her grievance into concrete intervention and her lamentation into a critique of authority and global and systemic oppression.

Described as 'one of the few Indonesian women who has the courage to openly articulate different, challenging opinions',¹ Arahmaiani transforms a wide variety of found objects, images and icons by fusing diverse media (painting, photography, video, collage and assemblage) and disciplines (music, dance and theatre). Starting with and later moving away from painting – a medium Arahmaiani found limiting – her integration of several mediums fulfils her need for a space that will connote an 'expanded concept of art itself'. Her approach also springs from her wish to balance the East and the West, the spiritual and the material in her life.



ARAHMAIANI, *Burning Body – Burning Country (II)*, 1999, installation and performance, acrylic paint, plastic flowers, scissors, crowbar, rice, drum frame, Manila. Photograph Dick Daroy.

This perspective springs from Arahmaiani's multinational training, first as a child who was already learning to paint, sing and dance from a very young age, then as an art student in Bandung and later as a scholar in Australia (at the Paddington Art School) and Holland (at the AKI Instituut voor Hoger Beeldend Kunsonderwijs Oost Nederland).

But more importantly, Arahmaiani's choice of readily accessible materials and easy-to-implement techniques can be traced to her informal street education, which began at the age of fourteen. Exasperated with the restrictions and hypocrisies of her class, she ran away from her home and lived on the streets of Jakarta for eight years. It was during her nomadic existence that Arahmaiani witnessed first-hand the stark realities of social injustice, especially against women. This background, and her study of philosophy, literature, poetry and history, compel her to confront not only issues related to form and aesthetics, but also to what she calls 'non-artistic' social and cultural issues. In her statement for the Manila conference, Arahmaiani said '[as I] interacted with other disciplines and elements of other cultures, I gradually developed my awareness on gender, politics and economic issues'.

Because she can be very direct – even grim and determined – in her works, some critics take Arahmaiani to task for being too literal and tending to have a predilection for collecting trinkets, or what one writer called a 'souvenir-shop mentality'.² Arahmaiani argues that she wants

her work to be 'less intellectual' and as easy to understand as possible: 'My art doesn't talk about composition, "essential" line, "harmonious" colours or "matching" arrangements', she writes in her essay entitled 'The Basis of my Thought is Concerned With the Conjunction of Opposites'. ... 'The focus of my attention is the situation, the forces which "move the body" – that which is opposed to "form". Consequently, my art is not "retinal"; its objective is not to please the eyes. What's of primary importance is the actual process of creation.'

This preference for the conceptual and visceral, rather than the optical and formal, is evident in a number of Arahmaiani's installations, such as *Sacred Coke*, 1994; *Coke Circle*, 1995; and *Sex, Religion and Coca-Cola*, 1996, which use Coca-Cola as the central signifier for imperialism, a phenomenon often cloaked in the seductive language of advertising and decorated with the flattening language of multiculturalism. In *Etalase*, 1994, a coke bottle is displayed under glass, as if in a museum. When *Etalase* was first exhibited in Jakarta, members of a Muslim fundamentalist group were offended by the juxtaposition of a condom and the Koran, which were displayed along with the coke bottle, and proceeded to remove the items. 'When (Arahmaiani) complained', narrates Bangkok-based writer Jennifer Gampell, 'they threatened her physically and promised to publicize the incident in the Muslim press'.³

Although the artist and the protesters later reached a compromise, the incident shows how art can disturb the most entrenched value systems by transgressing lines that divide the gallery and daily life, the profound and the profane, the authentic and the superficial, and the neo-colonial past and present. Framing the objects in a museum setting, Arahmaiani puts together the disparate symbols of Islam, sexual intercourse and cultural imperialism to mingle in a seemingly dry and matter-of-fact arrangement. According to Apinan Poshyananda, she: 'conflates the obsession with rituals and the superficialities that generally accompany them. For her, the dangers of blind infatuation with anaesthetized symbols of religion can be as demeaning and depressing as ecstasies over Western values and materialism'.⁴

A similar thematic concern is seen in the performance and installation *Nation for Sale*, shown during the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 1996. A metaphor for the realities of the region, *Nation for Sale* plays out the themes of Arahmaiani's body of work, including the displacement of whole social sectors by technology and global capital and the homogenisation of cultures mesmerised by the culture industry. As Arahmaiani has stated: 'This capitalistic system somehow forces my people to adopt the value system of the capitalist so they start selling everything that they have, including their country. So the country sells everything.'

Offerings from A to Z took place in 1996 in a Buddhist crematorium

in Chiangmai, Thailand. The piece was inspired by the memory of Arahmaiani's arrest by the military in 1983 for creating an allegedly subversive installation on the street with three friends.⁵ At different times during the performance, Arahmaiani lay down, first amid guns and weaponry, and later on the stone table used for the cremation of corpses. In the first part of the performance, Arahmaiani was covered with a blood-smeared blanket, alluding to menstrual discharge and to the blood spilled by men and women alike during periods of crisis and violence. She then performed the ritual of washing the corpse, using a bowl placed at one end of the stone slab. Pinned to the walls around her were pornographic images, signifying her disgust at the way the media is manipulated to communicate eroticised violence.

The work's allusion to blood, particularly menstrual blood, is significant, since it is a strand that is often weaved into Arahmaiani's artistic motifs. When a woman menstruates, she is forbidden to perform religious rituals and to enter sacred places because it is generally believed that she is 'dirty' or 'contaminated'. By offering herself in a ritual that deviates from mainstream Javanese cosmology, Arahmaiani seizes the ritual space and 'contaminates' it with her own rites of dying, washing and cleansing.

In a similar vein, Arahmaiani incorporated menstrual blood in her work *Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind*, 1996, by pasting a grid-like construction of unused sanitary napkins on the wall; in the middle of the grid was a picture of herself holding medical equipment, and on her forehead is an unused sanitary napkin on which is painted a red cross. In her hand she holds an enlarged IUD, which appears like a scythe held by the angel of death. In front of the wall of sanitary napkins was a stool on which a vial of blood rested on a piece of gauze. The image strips menstrual blood of its negative connotations; instead, it symbolises fertility, not just of the womb but also of the mind.

At the core of Arahmaiani's universe is her aspiration to achieve balance, which permeates her works' aesthetic and political agenda. This is evident in *Lingga-Yoni*, 1994, a painting which was exhibited with *Etalase* and which similarly elicited hostility from some viewers because of its sacrilegious combination of forms of 'cosmic copulation' (inspired by Hindu cosmology) and the sacred (Arabic letters which are inseparable elements of the sacred Koran). In this work Arahmaiani places the Hindu genital symbols of the *lingga* (male) and the *yoni* (female), in the reverse of their normal positions (the yoni is placed on top), and combines them with Indo, Malay, Arabic and Palawa scripts as metaphors for disequilibrium, religious constraints and the pursuit of upright leadership and freedom of faith.



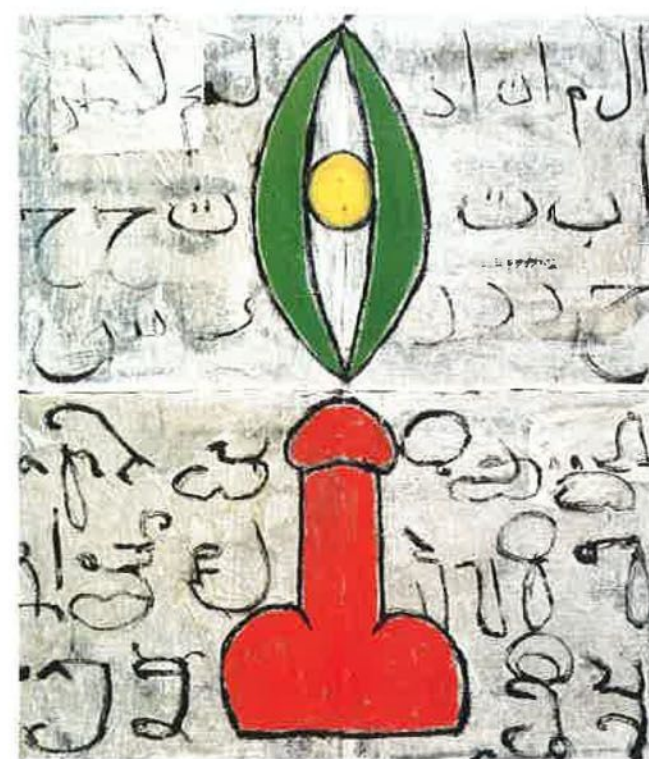
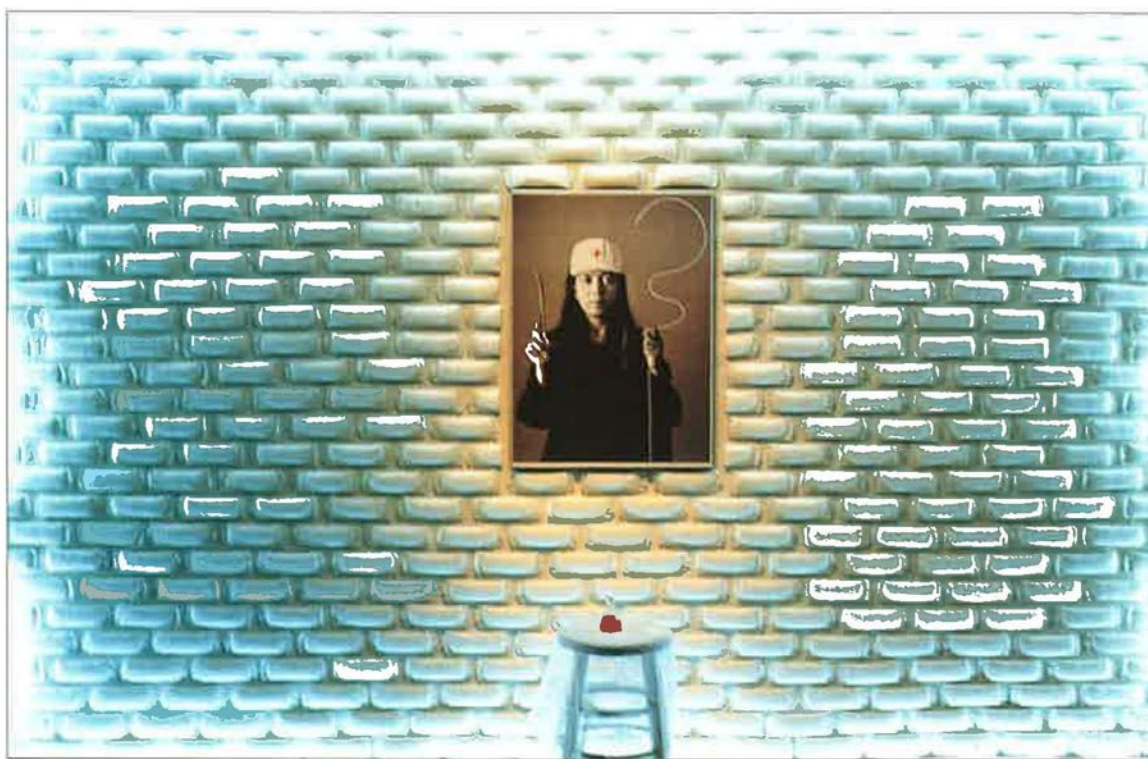
ARAHMAIANI, *Etalase*, 1994, installation, display case, photograph, icon, Coca-Cola bottle, the Koran, fan, Patkwa mirror, drum, sand, condoms, 95 x 146.5 x 65.5 cm. Photograph Manik Sriwanichpoom.



ARAHMAIANI, *Coke Circle*, 1995, installation and performance, Coca-Cola can, dummy, barbed wire, blouse, dimensions variable. Photograph the artist.

ARAHMAIANI,
Offerings From A
to Z, 1996 (part 3),
installation and
performance, erotic
photos, dimensions
variable, Padaeng
Cemetery, Chiangmai,
Thailand. Photograph
Manit Sriwanichpoom.





above, left: ARAHMAIANI, *Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind*, 1996 (detail), installation and performance, sanitary napkins, medical equipment, stool, vial of blood, dimensions variable. Photograph Manit Sriwanichpoom; right: ARAHMAIANI, *Lingga-Yoni*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 x 140 cm. Photograph the artist.

Putting the yoni on top of the lingga is Arahmaiani's way of restoring balance between the destructive forces of the masculine (the lingga as capital mutilating the earth) and the nurturing elements of the feminine (the yoni as earth). 'Because of the domination of the lingga', she says, 'what we are doing is actually choking the earth into pieces because it has become the private property (of a few). They see it as an object, a material object that they can chop up and sell.'

This theme is pursued in *A Piece of Land for Sale*, 1995, where a piece of earth is 'revived' through medical tubes and other paraphernalia. Arahmaiani attributes this reliance on technology to sustain life to western science's construal of nature 'as irrational and passive'. However, 'it may suddenly erupt and be uncontrollable. Western science misses this quality, so it goes astray.'

In her life and art, Arahmaiani continues to seek balance and harmony with the earth and the forces of nature. But it is an ideal that remains a hope, for there is no balance in her life. Her life is racked by tensions related to her religion, which she does not follow, the oppressive practices of her race, and her ethnicity, which she continually questions and subverts. As she said in her talk at the Manila conference:

As a young woman artist I realize it [is] a difficult way that I have chosen. The repressive government is operating on the basis of militarism in combination with Javanese Muslim feudalism and patriarchal system, which I believe, breed a culture of violence – physically and psychologically. The system never gave enough room for women to express themselves freely apart from being a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter or sister, though she might also be a career woman at the same time.

Despite the pressure and the difficulties of being a woman and artist, Arahmaiani wants to transcend 'the whole idea of the war of the sexes' and the idea 'that woman is a victim'. She refuses to buckle under the weight of despair and desperation and rises above her feelings of helplessness and anger. She resolutely turns her personal rage into public articulations of grief and grievance by taking risks, expressing defiance and enduring the pains of rebirth and transformation. In her images and her practice, Arahmaiani is saying that although women are continually burned by the fires of oppression, it is through such experiences that women can gain strength and finally break free and move on.

- 1 Martinus Dwi Marianto, 'The Crack from which Indonesian Contemporary Art Emerges', *Asia Yesterday Today and Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue, three artists from the Cemeti Foundation, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and three from the World of Polar Forces, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- 2 Eleanor Heartney, 'Asia Now', *Art in America*, February 1997.
- 3 Jennifer Gampell, 'Balancing Act', *Manager*, May 1996.
- 4 Apinan Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, Asia Society, New York, 1996.
- 5 Marianto, 'Arahmaiani: Artistic Practice of an Indonesian Nomadic Artist', *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996.

Images courtesy the artist.

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