

TABOO



Taboo and Transgression in Contemporary Indonesian Art

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Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art | Cornell University

CAT. 11

ARAHMAIANI

I Don't Want to

Be a Part of Your

Legend, 2004

Video still

Coutesy of the artist



In *I Don't Want to Be a Part of Your Legend*, **ARAHMAIANI** (born 1961) also reads her own identity through a reinterpretation of a heavily laden Indian Hindu epic that remains popular in Javanese society today. Arahmaiani, or Iani, is best known as a performance artist, but recently she has been experimenting with video as well. Common to a lot of contemporary art, during the last two decades much of her work tends toward unambiguous sociopolitical commentary. As government development projects plundered natural and human resources, and the list of human rights abuses and censorship of the media mounted, artists funneled their frustration and desperation into their work. Beginning in the early 1980s, Arahmaiani and a handful of other artists, such as Tisna Sanjaya, Heri Dono, FX Harsono, and Eddi Hara, explored possibilities of intervening with public spaces in order to directly communicate ideas to the public in ways not possible in more conventional art forms. For example, in 1982, Iani wrapped her body in newspaper advertisements and walked through busy street shops in Bandung (see fig. 12). Here, Iani was concerned with how our sense of the world is formed through images in mass culture, often images of modernity that most Indonesians could not afford to buy. And through her mixed-media work *A Piece of Land for Sale* she makes a case against

ARAHMAIANI



FIG. 35
ARAHMAIANI
*A Piece of Land
 for Sale*, 1995
 Installation:
 surgical equipment
 and dried grass
 Courtesy of
 the artist

economic development programs by pointing to their negative effects (fig. 35).

In the late 1990s, her performances addressing human-rights issues took an aggressive approach as news leaked out about military actions in the northern Sumatran province of Aceh and killings on the small island of East Timor. Art critic and independent curator Hendro Wiyanto calls this type of art a "replication of wounds." The acts performed by Iani reproduced violence not only as a means of commenting on violence, but also as a kind of catharsis (purging the unclean or polluted body/psyche). With her own body as the artwork, Iani's actions can be read in an Indonesian context as her attempt at exorcising the collective body as well.⁸⁰

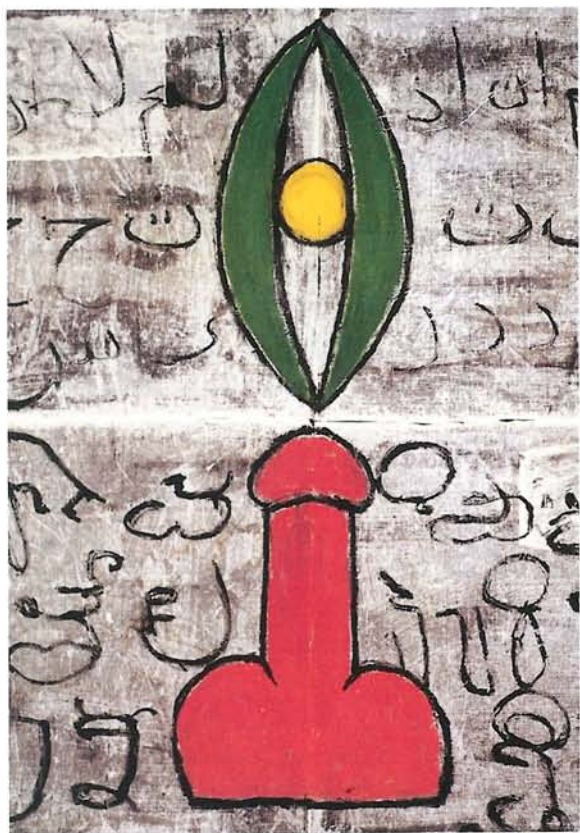
In Indonesia, though, an artwork made by a woman in a manner associated with male artists, meaning sharp social criticism, aggressive, straightforward and/or depicting violence, is often seen as inappropriate.⁸¹ This in part is due to associations of the socially engaged artist as hero, implying male. In many respects, Iani's work repeatedly transgresses gender-biased boundaries. Because of which, her work has often been dismissed by the Indonesian art world. International art exhibitions have, however, provided space to voice opinions not allowed in Indonesia. In some respects this is a form of exoticism of the political in Indonesian art just ripe for an international audience accustomed to social critiques in art. The same can be said for Iani's art that addresses gender relations in her own cultural context.

Iani rejects labels such as "Muslim woman artist" or "feminist Asian artist," categories used in both Western and Indonesian misrecognitions of her work. Iani and other women artists resent the label "feminist artist" as a condescending term used in Indonesia to dismiss critical works of art by women, as well as a form of cultural hijacking by the Western discourse. The latter, according to Iani, tends to universalize women's issues, especially those of Muslim women.⁸²

The plight of women has been the subject of some artworks by male artists, but usually represented as either spiritual figures or as impoverished mothers symbolizing the impoverished nation. However, gender issues, not just realities of women, have only recently shown signs of a sustainable dialogue in Indonesian art circles. Whereas painting and sculpture carry expectations pertaining to a "feminine" aesthetic in Indonesia, performance art provides Iani a fairly open forum to transgress boundaries of decorum expected in these other fields.⁸³

A driving force behind Iani's work concerning gender issues has been pre-Islamic beliefs in cosmic forces which, like processes of human procreation, are divided into male and female attributes. However, these must work in tandem in order for their regenerative powers to wholly manifest themselves through human existence. For example, *Linga-Yoni* (1994) combines pre-Islamic symbols of *lingga* and *yoni* (powerful symbols of male and female genitalia, and metaphors for these as cosmic energies) with Islamic calligraphy to discuss notions of the necessary universal balance between the male and female energies that is denied by an Islamic patriarchal society (fig. 36). This imbalance manifests itself in terms of economic, political and social inequalities. When this piece

FIG. 36
ARAHMAIANI
Linga/Yoni, 1994
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of
the artist



was shown in Indonesia, Islamic groups threatened to close the exhibition because the painting represented a simplified form of a penis combined with Arabic writing. For Iani, this underscores a deep-seated problem in cultural and religious norms pertaining to the human body. No longer allowed to celebrate its life-giving energies (simultaneously male and female), the body must be covered, hidden, controlled, and even punished. For Iani, the female body, as a mystery, is doubly erased as it is both the source of and controlled by male desire.

Iani carries many of the concerns discussed above into her new video project *I Don't Want to Be a Part of the Your Legend* (2004) (cat. 11). In some respects this video is an extension of her previous performances such as *Dayang Sumbi Refuses Status Quo* (1999) that was performed in various venues. For this performance, Iani, dressed in semitraditional costume, invited the audience to write whatever came to mind onto her body. Having been literally "caught in the act" of symbolic violence by "inscribing" her body with words, Iani hoped participants would become aware of invisible processes that define women's identities and that control our bodies. Similar in intent, *Your Legend* is Iani's reinterpretation of "the examination of Sita," the final scene of the *Ramayana*. In Indonesia, the *Ramayana* has been translated into myriad of media, from the famous *Wayang* shadow plays, comic books, and dance theater to radio programs. It remains a potent filter through which Javanese interpret current events, and provides them ideal role models for proper social and spiritual behavior.⁸⁴

In simple terms, the main character of the *Ramayana* epic is the god-prince Rama, one of Vishnu's many incarnations. As a final episode among his heroic

and divine deeds, Rama rescues his wife Sita from Ravana, the demon-god of the underworld. However, Rama doubts Sita's chastity. In order to prove her purity, Sita endures a series of tests, among which is a trial by fire. *I Don't Want to Be a Part of Your Legend* is Iani's reinterpretation of "the examination of Sita's purity" from a contemporary woman's perspective. By reworking the scene from her own point of view, Iani calls attention to "how a man's prestige and value depends upon his ability to maintain control over a woman's body."⁸⁵ She also pays homage to a woman's strength and powers of regeneration. For Sita does not lament her fate, nor does she regret the life she has lived.

Iani reinterprets this story through *Wayang kulit*. Traditional *Wayang kulit* consists of intricately carved and lavishly painted two-dimensional puppets made from leather. A long, thin piece of buffalo horn acts as the "spine" of each puppet. A traditional Javanese form of story telling, when performed it was thought to put cosmic forces into motion in the material world. It therefore requires a spiritually powerful person to act as *dalang*, or puppet master. Through prowess of storytelling, the puppet master retells the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics through puppets representing individual characters in the stories. Iani briefly studied the complexity of the puppet master's skill with Balinese master I Made Sija, and Slamet Gundono from Java.⁸⁶

In actual *Wayang* performances, audiences can view the play from either side of a screen. On the one side, the audience exists in the time of shadows, seeing only the shadows of each puppet projected from a single light source onto the screen. If watching from the side on which the *dalang* sits, the audience exists in "real" time.

The screen, then, acts as the thin line between two simultaneous realities and two kinds of time. In Javanese cosmology, the shadow world is sometimes more real because of its invisible effects on the visible world. Rather than traditional leather puppets, Iani has made her Sita puppet from large dried leaves, eloquently alluding to the fragile line between physical and immaterial existence. While Sita glides across the darkly lit foreground, her shadow twin floats across the wind-blown screen behind her. We see the physical form and its shadow within the same space and at the same time; the distance between the time of shadows and "real" time has collapsed.

I Don't Want to Be a Part of Your Legend is more than a retelling from a woman's perspective. It is also autobiographical. Through Sita, Iani asks, "Is it possible I could make a bargain with fate and not become part of your legend? Is there another possibility for me so that I don't need to bear the burden of someone under suspicion...?"