



## Arahmaiani

By Haupt & Binder | August 2003

Arahmaiani is a key figure in the current art scene in Indonesia. She gets around a lot and although her international reputation mainly comes from her performances, she also works with painting, drawing, installation, poetry, dance, and music. The following text on individual aspects and contexts of her work is based on a long talk, which we had the opportunity to have with her in Berlin in July 2003.



Currently, Arahmaiani is representing her country, together with Dadang Christanto, Tisna Sanjaya, and Made Wianta at the Indonesian National Pavilion of the 50th Venice Biennale. The presentation is called "Paradise Lost: Mourning of the World". Starting with the terrorist attack of 12 October 2002 on Bali, in which 202 people were killed, the artists confront violence and its consequences for their own country and for the whole world. The actuality of the problem has once again been made clear by the attack on the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta on 5 August 2003.



From a western perspective, the theme of the Indonesian Pavilion may appear to be first of all on the loss of an exotic holiday paradise. For Arahmaiani and her fellow countrymen, however, the consequences of the attacks are on quite a different level. Although they themselves have been victimized by a small group of terrorists – and this in many different ways – they are discriminated and distrustfully treated as potential suspects in Western countries.

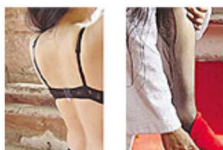


In Venice, Arahmaiani shows a piece on her personal experience with this attitude. On "11 June 2002" (that is the title of the installation) she was on her way to Canada and had to wait at Los Angeles airport for a connecting flight. She was arrested by immigration because of not having a visa for the stopover. Following a four hour-long cross-examination, she was supposed to be put in a cell. Only after long negotiations was she allowed to spend the night in the hotel room that she had reserved – under heavy surveillance. In order to be quite sure that nothing would happen, the officer – himself a Muslim from Pakistan – spent the whole night in the room with her.



When we interviewed Arahmaiani one year later, she was still deeply shocked by this experience. It was all the more offensive to her, since together with many others in Indonesia, she has for a long time already been active against intolerance and militant interpretations of Islam. Instead of being seen as allies, they are the more often harassed and treated as a threat.

With just under 90 percent of devout inhabitants from a total of 220 million, Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Even if the vehement and violent appearance of radical Islamic groups stands at the centre of international awareness, these are a minority. The majority of Indonesian Muslims thinks differently. Counter movements such as the Liberal Islam Network, stand up for a modern interpretation of their



religion and defend its liberal, moderate tradition. Starting in the 15th century, Arab merchants were responsible for the spreading of Islam in Indonesia; they were strongly influenced by Sufism, and did not, therefore, preach the strict observance of irrefutable rules, but sought a spiritual, individual relationship to the Creator. The immanent tolerance of this line of thought combined with a direct affinity to Hindu and Buddhist elements enabled many forms of pre-Islamic cultures to survive until today. V.S. Naipaul reckons even that the inhabitants of the island of Java have selected what appeared to be the most human and liberating traits from each of the consecutively introduced beliefs, in order to incorporate them into their own religion.

Arahmaiani, an avowed Muslima, confirms in principle this statement. Her father is an Islamic scholar and her mother is of Javanese Hindu-Buddhist extraction. Already their daughter's name was a compromise. She readily explains that "Arahma" goes back to the Arabic language meaning „loving“, and „iani“ comes from „human being“ in Hindi. Her upbringing saw the coexistence of both convictions: whereas her father provided a strict Islamic culture and instruction, her mother's family enabled her to learn Javanese dances, songs, legends, poetry, and custom.

Arahmaiani considers that her natural inclination to play the role of a mediator between the worlds is anchored in her origins. Neither within her own family, nor in her homeland is communication between cultures free of conflict. Her awareness of belonging to "another" culture, however, developed most particularly with trips to the "West", first to Australia, and later to Europe. Only when confronted with western art and philosophy, did she realize how different these were from her own "Islamic-Hindu-Buddhist-Animist thinking and lifestyle". Arahmaiani feels that it is a considerable challenge, on this level also, to first raise conflictive issues in search of a realistic base for mutual interests and complementary features, and then to try for reciprocal acceptance.

1991/92, during a postgraduate course in the Dutch town of Enschede, her teachers recommended her to study Joseph Beuys, recognizing a closeness between her intentions and his concepts. Although she found that the specific German context was essential for the understanding of Beuys, she was surprised to discover many similarities to the Asian views with which she was familiar. She said that she had most particularly noticed this with spiritual interpretations of nature, where often only the symbolical "wrapping" was different.

In the activist components of Beuys' "extended definition of art" she saw the confirmation of her own endeavor in art, not only to create a nice surface, but to bring problems to the point, to provoke discussion and thought, to interfere with debates, and to participate in social processes. Already during her studies in Bandung at the beginning of the 1980s, it bothered her that the course was based on the early days of western modernism and therefore had nothing to do with the realities of her country. Initial street actions gave her the reputation of a rebel; she was sent to jail and suspended from school. Those years were formative to her conviction - which she still has today - that she must articulate her thoughts loudly and sharply, so as to be heard and taken seriously.

Repression, injustice, violence, conformity, sellout of the country to the West and other abuse during

Suharto's military regime (1966 - 1998), gave plenty of grounds for protest. Arahmaiani experienced personally the hardship of social injustice in a country of the Third World, when she lived for a while on the street. Her vehement criticism of capitalism is rooted in direct experience and observations; when, for example, she reflects on the fact that everything becomes an object of consumption - even culture and the arts - she comes to grips with the system itself.

A central theme of her work is the situation of the woman. Following her principle of not concerning herself with anything outside of her own immediate realm of experience and of taking, as far as possible, her own situation as the base from which she works, she is involved with questions of her own identity as a woman within a community that is ruled by men, as a female artist with a critical approach, as an Asian and Muslima in the international context of her many travels and stays abroad.

In addition, it is part of Arahmaiani's ethos as a female artist to use her public presence in order to attract attention to violence against women in general and to female discrimination in Indonesia's Islamic society in particular. A fundamental aspect of her criticism of the prevailing interpretation of Islam is that men derive their claim to sole authority in decision taking from it. She acts against religion as a rigid set of rules and defends her right to her own interpretation as an individual and as a woman. The fact that she is repeatedly faced with hostility when presenting according pieces and performances, she grasps as a consequence of her strategy of provocation in the hope that she will at least have set off a process of reflection.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, however, Arahmaiani felt prompted to combine/complement her critical attitude towards Islam with a fight against its general stigmatization. When she is intent on trying to make people mostly of the Western world understand that the majority of Muslims are just as peace-loving as themselves, she does not consider that she is defending this religion, but simply pure common sense.

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(From the German: Helen Adkins)