

NEGOTIATING HOME HISTORY AND NATION

Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011





natural resources. For her, the body is a powerful medium for drawing awareness to causes. 'I am focusing on different states of mind in terms of psychological and mental well-being in response to the crisis and current issues.' Chuyia Chia has participated in international performance festivals for years and is now a part-time resident of Gothenburg, Sweden, the home of Live Action Gothenburg founded by Joakim Stampe. Live Action has hosted artists from Southeast Asia for some time and acts as a European hub for performance art, expanding the Southeast Asia network to the continent.

The Indonesian artist Arahmaiani (b. 1961) studied at the Bandung Institute of Technology, once the hotbed of political activism on the island of Java. Arahmaiani has been making performance and multimedia works since the early 1990s when she discovered Josef Beuys's 'social sculpture' and found affinities between his 'spiritual interpretation of nature' and Asian aesthetics. Through her body, she is able to explore the confluences of religion and politics and attempt to maintain spirituality while fighting the system; or as she states, be both a feminist and a Muslim without contradiction.¹¹ Arahmaiani's work has always transcended borders. In 1996, she enacted a performance where she laid down on a slab of stone in a Buddhist crematorium in Chiang Mai, Thailand, surrounded by pornographic images of women to raise awareness of the exploitation of women in Thailand. Since 2001, she has been acutely aware of the shift in attitudes towards Muslims in the world as she, herself, has also been the victim of religious profiling during a stopover in the United States where she was detained because of her nationality. In a post-national world, artists from Southeast Asia like Arahmaiani nonetheless face challenges because of their national origins. This points to a greater problem facing contemporary Asian artists more generally—that of recognition and acceptance outside of their own countries. Performance artists tackle this problem by facing it head on, directly with and through their bodies.

In the United States, the history of performance art has long been intertwined with feminist history. In the 1970s, women used their bodies to stand up against the male-dominated art establishment. Performance offered women an outlet for expressing rage and shock the public into paying attention to the injustices and violence toward women. Nudity was a tool for reversing the gaze that men had been directed at women for centuries. Nudity empowered women. Performance also offered them a platform for expressing their anger through satire and humour. Playing with costume, make-up and female genitalia, these artists fought for attention and credibility as artists. In Southeast Asia, women have a different set of battles to fight. Their concern for women's conditions does not manifest itself through the naked body. Nor, as the examples above illustrate, are all women performance artists necessarily concerned with feminism. Their concerns are related to humankind in general as Chuyia Chia's work demonstrates. Or religion and the subjectivity of women as Arahmaiani's work represents. Still, the examples of Chia, Arahmaiani, Amanda Heng, Lynn Lu, Ly Hoang Ly, mentioned here notwithstanding, women are largely under-represented in Southeast Asian performance circles. Many of the performance festivals modelled after NIPAF are organised and directed by men. Women, however, do create communities. Perhaps not collectively as American feminists in New York City and California had, but individually through their actions. Performance art stirs them to take action because it is an action-based art form.

You (Social Sculpture after Joseph Beuys)-
Singapore, 2009. Image courtesy of J.L. Morisot.

Life's Turning Points, 2009,
performance, four hours, Rathausgalerie,
Image by Stephanie Senge.

¹¹'Feminism in Islam: Performing Beyond Borders', paper given at 'Gender and Southeast Asia' conference, University of Passau, Germany, September 2005.

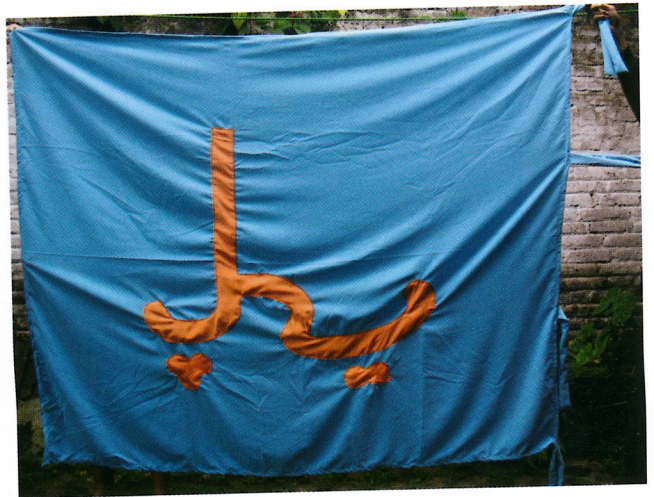
In his now classic cultural history of pre-modern Asia, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680*, Anthony Reid explains Southeast Asians' predilection for performance in the following way. 'Because their climate was mild and their basic diet of rice, fish, and fruits more dependably available than in most parts of the world, Southeast Asians had natural advantages in escaping from the constant struggle for subsistence. They may have had more time to devote to what would today be classified as leisure than most other peoples of that era.'¹² Clifford Geertz offers another explanation for Southeast Asians' natural talent for art in his interpretation of Bali as a 'theater state'.¹³ Both Reid and Geertz see performances, whether dance, drama, music or boat racing, as integral components of society and necessary forms of socialisation and social interaction. In Vietnam, group singing contests, where pairs of performers take turns singing in front a group, usually a village gathering, are methods of creating communal ties. The precedence for using performance as a means of 'networking' is well established by these historical examples. Whether or not contemporary artists are aware of these past practices is perhaps not the point. What is relevant is that performance practices endure and have a lasting quality to them that are easily understood and assimilated into contemporary art discourses. This means that, rather than see performance art as a form of avant-garde 'anti-art' and experimental artistic strategy coming from the West, one can easily interpret performance as a local phenomenon, one that has ties to traditional art practices in ways that are not always recognised. However, one must avoid essentialising Southeast Asians' cultural habits and not resort to generalisations about Southeast Asians as betel-chewing, fruit-eating rice farmers who 'enjoy leisurely pursuits' as Anthony Reid suggests and emphasise rather, that performance comes from a tradition of socialisation through art. This socialisation process transcends borders and reaches communities of artists from all over the region. As Lee Wen said: 'I am not doing performance art because I want to be a performance artist. I am doing it because I am a human being.'¹⁴



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Performance event at Ryllega Gallery, Hanoi, 2004. Image by and courtesy of Nora Taylor.

- ¹² Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: 1450–1680*, vol. 1, *The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 173.
- ¹³ Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- ¹⁴ Lee Wen, conversation at 'Action Script: Symposium on Performance Art Practice and Documentation in Asia', Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, 22 October 2010.



Performance relics, flags
150 × 180 cm



Arahmaiani
 Crossing Point, 2011
 Performance video
 5:38 min
 Singapore Art Museum Collection