



TRADITIONS

CONTEMPORARY ART

IN ASIA

TENSIONS



21. Lohar Chawl section of Bombay, India, 1996.

22. **Nalini Malani**, page from *Hieroglyphs, Lohar Chawl*, 1990–91, five books with series of photocopied collages and paintings, this page 23 × 28 cm (9 × 11 in.), courtesy of the artist.



23. **Arahmaiani**, *Lingga-Yoni* (detail), 1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 × 140 cm (71 3/8 × 55 1/8 in.) overall, courtesy of the artist.

of a lion. She holds a gun, a conch, and flowers as she simultaneously fights and gives blessing. Singh was strongly criticized for her depiction of this goddess as well as for her particular representation of the fallen man, who is said to resemble the assassinated Rajiv Gandhi.⁹⁸

Malani freely chooses influences from modern art. The fragments in her works reveal her refusal to be lured into the opposition “traditional” versus “modern.” Her admiration for works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Delacroix, and Degas is reflected in her use of color and composition. But that is only part of the richness in Malani’s intricate paintings. Her ability to observe, cogitate, and ponder over numerous ideas and themes, and then to overlay them ingeniously in her oeuvre forces us to realize complexities that lie within Bombay, India’s internationally famous urban disaster. Malani draws endless visual inspiration from Lohar Chawl, the trade-center slum where her studio is situated.⁹⁹ Wholesale merchants and distributors of electrical gadgets and switches clutter in tiny shops. *Pathiwala* and *hamali* (loaders and coolies) sway their hips in rhythmic strides as they carry the merchandise high on their heads like an eternal burden. Sweat-stained clothes are uniforms of the working class who are trapped and bonded in the intricate patron-client relationship of the business hub of Lohar Chawl. The pavements are also the living quarters of these workers; places to rest, sleep, mourn, love, and work. In this plagued landscape of poverty, bodies are pressed against bodies and refuse is piled in alleyways where it stinks, seethes, and comes alive in the monolithic heat. She once wrote, “Emotions that grip one in the ordinary context of life: oppression, anxiety, self-absorption, anger.... I am obsessed of ‘getting into’ these people.... Recall them from my memory and to achieve the ‘right’ inflexion of muscle or a wince of the lips.” The books that comprise her “Hieroglyph” series consist of layered and reappropriated images: European masters, Binode Behari Mukherjee, and the Kalighat paintings

that are incorporated with ordinary life of Lohar Chawl.¹⁰⁰ Turning the pages of Malani’s books is analogous to peeling away layers of society where the paradoxes of rich and poor, pity and pride, bitterness and determination are put on display. Within the intricate networks of commerce lies a stratum of daily religious practices as devotees worship the sacred icon inside the Hanuman Temple. At night, the luminous neon image of the divine monkey is lit at the entrance.

Malani’s collaboration in the performance of Heiner Mueller’s *Medeamaterial* has inspired her to explore the ways human emotions, such as hysteria and torment, are revealed through bodily changes. Metamorphoses of the body, changes of skin, and birth defects are issues raised in Malani’s series “Mutants” (1994). Unlike the “Hieroglyph” and “Degas Suite” series, these paintings are mirrors of violence in India and other Third World countries. Imperialism, in the guise of democracy and freedom, has resulted in dominant-subordinate positions. Atrocities caused by the hydrogen bomb and radioactive tests in peripheral places (such as the Pacific islands) have directly influenced Malani’s work. For example, she explained that high levels of radioactivity have resulted in “jellyfish” babies being born to Micronesian women. These mutant babies look like blobs of jelly with no heads. Malani’s “Mutants” are analogous to those monstrosities. They also refer to poverty. Damaged people on crutches and stumps become metaphors for homelessness and dispossession. Their bisexuality adds to the feeling of discomfort and deformity. In a sea of redness, a girl grows inside a man; a green creature bursts out like uncontrolled fantasies. These mutants are evidence of something gone awfully wrong in our society. Yet, they manage to be neglected and ignored, as if their ghastly appearance were not apparent to onlookers whose curiosity demands a freakish new species, a mutant social form, a deplorable new order.

The Bandung-based artist **Arahmaiani** defines art as “creating a point of contact between the spiritual and the material.” Her choice of symbolic images can be contrasted to the figurative

paintings of Singh and Malani. Arahmaiani believes that Indonesian people, feeling the loss of freedom to speak, are inclined to suppress their grievances, anxiously forgiving and tolerating. In facing the issues of sex and religion head on, Arahmaiani confronts the interpretation of morality within the context of the confusing and contradictory Islamic society she inhabits. She cites as an example the fact that whenever a woman menstruates, she is forbidden from performing religious rituals or entering sacred places; it is generally believed that she is "contaminated." And, while religious laws take a firm stance regarding women's responsibilities for sexual relations within the bonds of marriage, the fact that there is little control of the sex industry seems to promote a two-sided view of female sexuality. By manipulating sacred symbols in specific contexts, Arahmaiani's works on the theme of sex and religion have generated hostility among the defenders of Islam. In *Lingga-Yoni* (1992), Arahmaiani combined Malay-Arabic and Palawa scripts with symbols of sexual organs to challenge religious constraints and freedom of faith.¹⁰¹ It is generally considered sacrilegious to include forms of "cosmic copulation" (inspired by the fifteenth-century *lingga-yoni* from Chandi Sukuh Temple in Central Java) with Arabic letters that are inseparable elements of the sacred Al-Qur'an.

But Arahmaiani always tries to interrogate the power of language and of signs that connote oppression and dogmatism. In her exhibition "Sex, Religion, and Coca-Cola," her painting *Lingga-Yoni* and another work containing a display cabinet of objects caused reverberations among Muslim viewers. The display case in *Etalase* (1994) suggests how objects are given symbolic power through the framing devices of the culture industry. In this case, Arahmaiani has placed several exquisite and possibly precious items in a museum setting: the Al-Qur'an, a pack of condoms, a Coke bottle, and a Buddha, among others. On the basis of inclusion and exclusion, tension is created around objects which signify the sacred and the profane, authenticity and trash, the colonial past and neocolonial present. By juxtaposing symbols of Islam, copulation, and cultural

imperialism in the same context, Arahmaiani conflates the obsession with rituals and the superficialities that generally accompany them. For her, the dangers of blind infatuation with anesthetized symbols of religion can be as demeaning and depressing as ecstasies over Western values and materialism. As a Muslim woman artist, Arahmaiani has placed herself in a challenging position. Not only is her art a catalyst for the inevitable debate over "Is it art?" but it also raises more fundamental questions about the marginality of women within Indonesian patriarchal society and mainstream art.¹⁰²

Although paintings by Singh, Malani, and Arahmaiani differ in medium from sculptures and installations by **Yun Suknam**, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, and Soo-Ja Kim, their works are connected by the common themes of female subjectivity. Yun's *Day and Night* (1995) is an installation of painted wood with cherry blossom pink and bright green embroidered furniture. Unlike Marisol's representational images which are linked with Pop Art, pre-Columbian art, and Early American woodcarving, Yun's wooden fragments relate directly to the art of common folk in Korea and to the role of Asian women in patriarchal society.¹⁰³ Yun draws inspiration from direct experience of hardship in her family where her mother carried the burden of domestic chores and raising children. In addition, the work comments on her own role as mother and wife, a task that demands various capacities from morning till night. In the sculpture, the mother, in traditional costume, protects the angelic baby and dutifully serves the faceless husband. As she shifts to her nocturnal role, more of her internal psyche is revealed. The empty pink room turns eerie and chilling as the chairs with skeletal, unpolished legs transform into sinister torturing traps with razor sharp instruments awaiting the master of the house to sit.¹⁰⁴

In her 1995 installation *Buang* (Trap), **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook** makes a visual comparison between being a woman and the process of being fixed, framed, oppressed, and blocked by social mores. Like a frail invalid or corpse, the sculpted figure of woman lies in a canoe-shaped



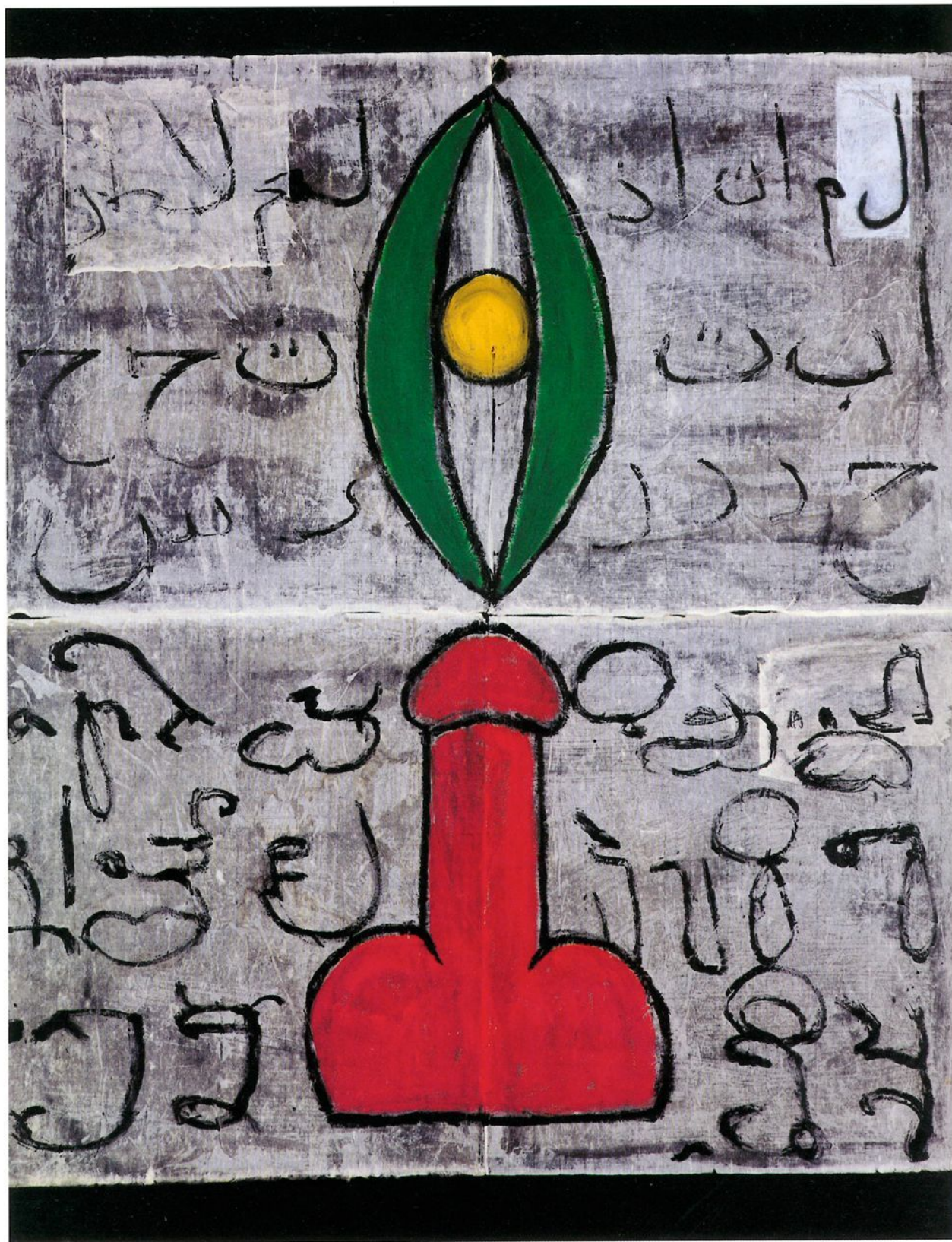
24. **Yun Suknam**, *Day and Night*, 1995, detail of installation showing painted wooden figure and plastic doll, H. of element approx. 165 cm (65 in.), courtesy of the artist.



25. **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook**, *Buang* (Trap), 1995, detail of installation with wood, metal plates, clay, and fiberglass, H. approx. 152 cm (60 in.), courtesy of the artist.

Arahmaiani

Indonesia



Lingga-Yoni, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
182 × 140 cm (71 3/8 × 55 1/8 in.)
Courtesy of the artist

texts on painting:
"Nature is Book"
(Indonesian language, Malay-Arabic script)

"Courageous, honest in fulfilling his duty,
leader of mankind, his excellency
Purnawarman"
(Sanskrit language, Palawa script)



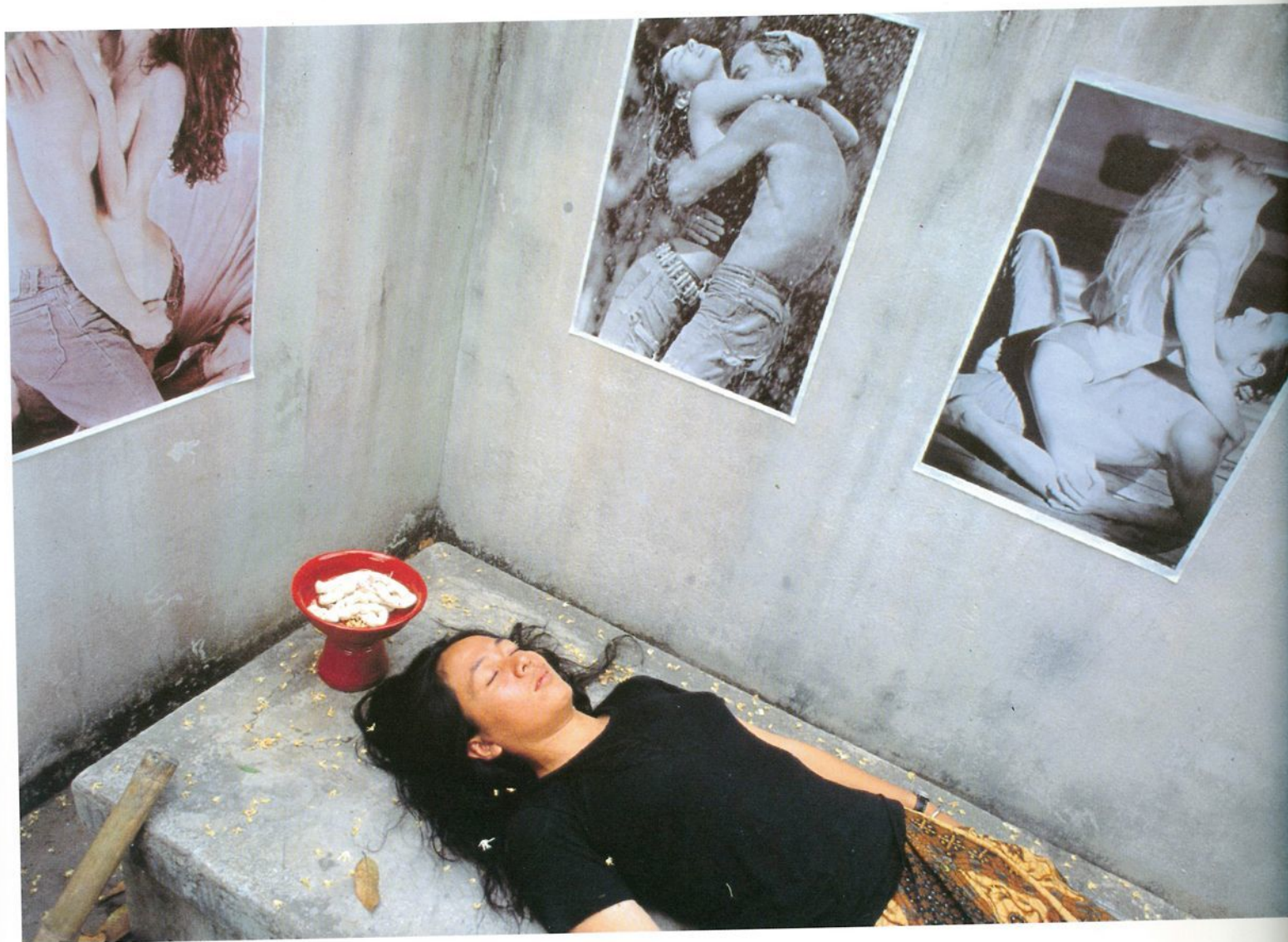
Etalase, 1994

Display case containing photograph, icon,
Coca-Cola bottle, Al-Qur'an, fan, Patkwa
mirror, drum, box of sand, and pack
of condoms

95 × 146.5 × 65.5 cm (37³/₈ × 57⁵/₈ × 25³/₄ in.)

Courtesy of the artist





Offerings from A to Z, Part 3.
performance at Padaeng Cemetery,
Chiang Mai, Thailand, January 1996