

# Video, an Art, a History

1965–2010

A Selection from the Centre Pompidou and Singapore Art Museum Collections



Up close, a shrivelled leaf artfully crafted to suggest a female profile pivots and flutters under the flickering light of a candle flame, as does its shadow. A caption announces that we are looking at the fire ordeal of Sita, Rama's wife from the *Ramayana* – the Sanskrit epic whose import in Southeast Asia is not to be underestimated. Non-speaking with only Arahmaiani's improvised vocals and synthesised sounds throughout the video, subtitles in Jawi and English by the artist make known the protagonist's tragedy:

"Is it possible that I could make a bargain with fate and not become part of your legend?  
Will it make my path easier and free of suffering?  
I've never regretted the path I've had to take even if it were strewn with every kind of thorn.  
Is there another possibility for me so that I don't need to bear the entire burden of a person who must be under suspicion, their purity doubted;  
a creature pushed aside who can't be trusted?  
I am a dry leaf tossed aloft by the wind.  
Falling into the pyre and becoming part of the fire."

Contrary to the legend in which Sita, the epitome of feminine virtue, survives the sacrificial fire unscathed, proving her chastity despite the long captivity by Ravana – but is nonetheless later banished by Rama who succumbs to popular opinion against her, Arahmaiani has the body of Sita presented as a fallen leaf sublimated by fire, uniting with the element which both consumes and creates. Despite Sita's unwavering dedication to the heroic code, matching that of any of the male literary he-

roes known, she has been alienated and victimised by demon and god alike. In relinquishing herself to the flames, she sheds the body confining her to the patriarchal framework, negating the narrative of the male heroic to embrace an ethos that celebrates the female principle of regeneration. This is the form her redress must take, for this alone can liberate her from the male *logos*, allowing her to even rise above it. Through Sita's transfiguration, Arahmaiani hence turns the tables entirely.

One of Indonesia's most prominent female performance artists, Arahmaiani avows a woman's right to play by her own rules with *I Don't Want to be a Part of Your Legend* – this time without adopting a confrontational stance or involving her own body as is typical of her practice in general. Again, she juxtaposes symbols and references Hindu, folk and Islamic – the ancient epic of Hindu origin, *wayang rumpit* (grass puppets) and Jawi script whose history is inextricable from Islam in Indonesia – to reflect the archipelago's rich history and culture. As much as the vacillation of Sita's representation between a withered leaf and a female silhouette (not unlike the rabbit-duck optical illusion in principle) demonstrates the relativity of perspective whereby perception is as much a product of mental activity as it is of the stimulus, the syncretism in this autobiographic work proposes that constructs of sexuality and culture are neither univocal nor monolithic.

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