

# Afterall

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Arahmaiani

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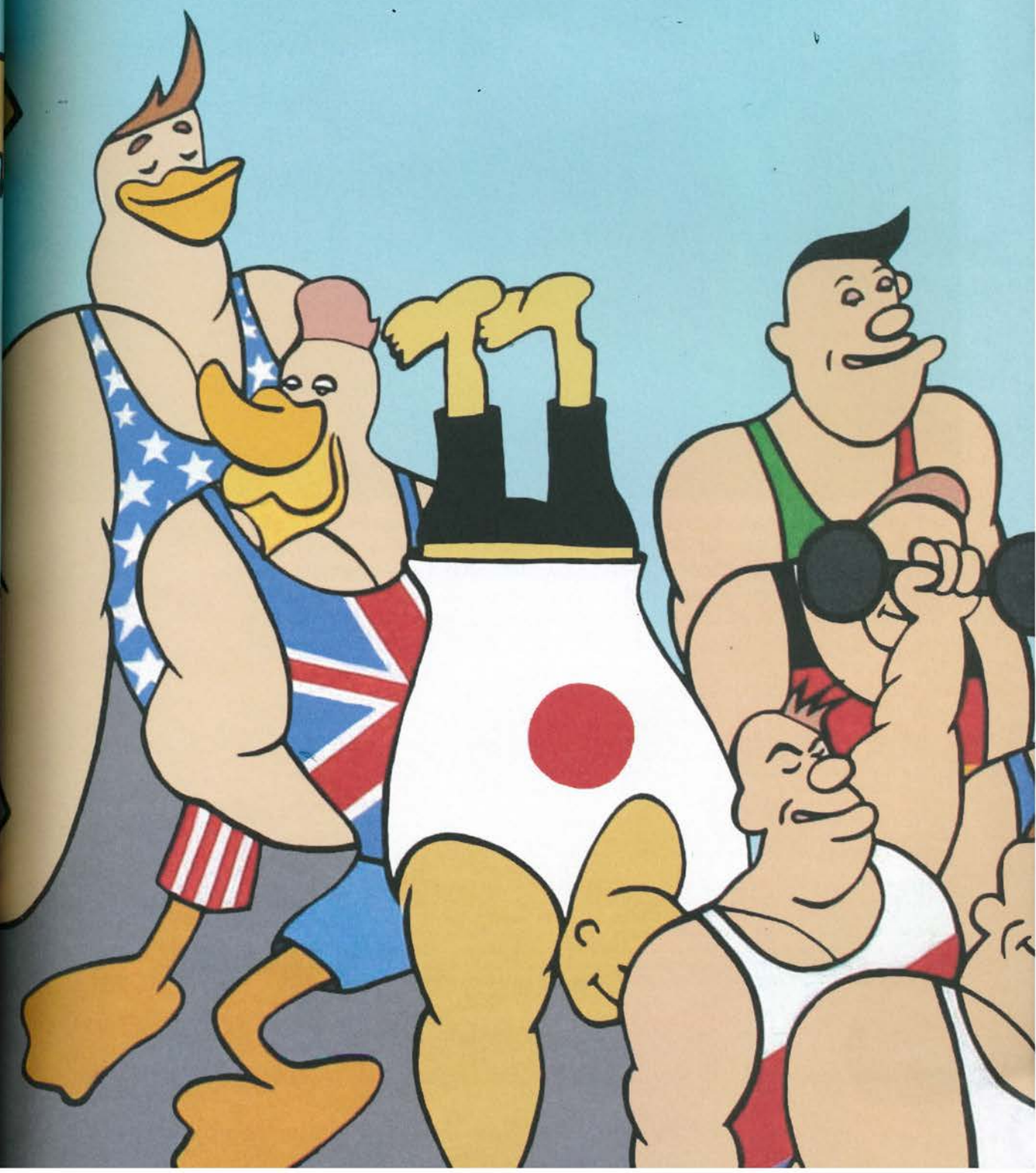
Chiang Mai Social Installation

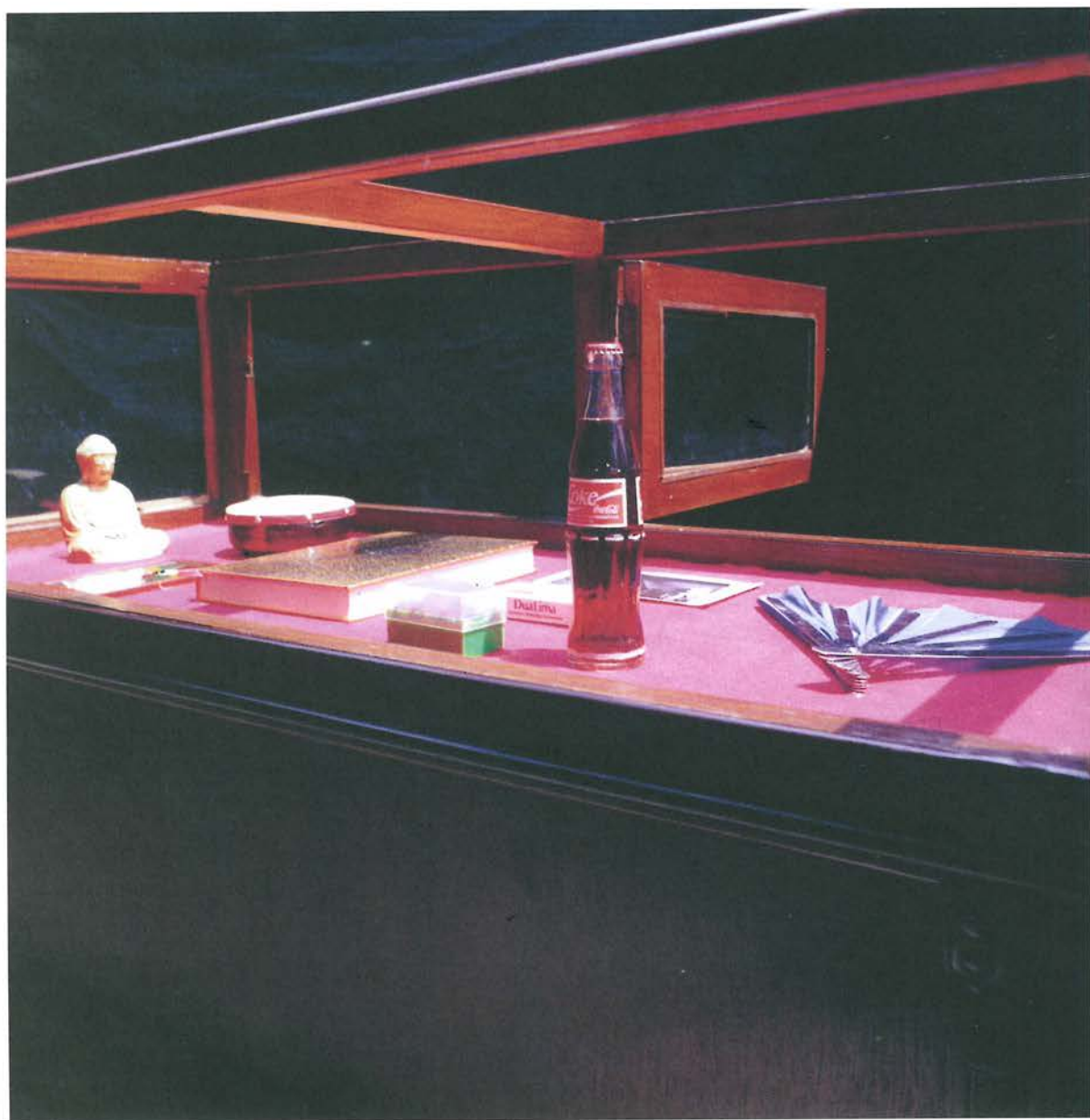


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Previous spread:  
Arahmaiani, *Free Market Indonesia*, 2008. Both images courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

# The Premise of Contradiction and Feminist Politics: Reflections on Arahmaiani's Art and Life

— Angela Dimitrakaki

Arahmaiani's art and activism suggest that she may have lived a slightly different history of the world. Or, to be more precise, born in Bandung, Indonesia in 1961, she seems to have lived a prefigured history of the world as known in 2016. This, of course, has to do with the vantage point from which the history of the world is normatively written and, by implication, presumed to be lived and 'known'. It is a vantage point affirming the hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the word, of a 'Western experience', and the principal issue addressed in this

mentalists, causing Arahmaiani to flee Indonesia to Australia and, later, Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Like so many other contemporary subjects, Arahmaiani has come to live a life of departures and arrivals, partly because of the fear of persecution, partly because of forms of activism that environmental challenges in Asia have demanded,<sup>3</sup> partly because of the ways production is organised in the art field today. This pattern of life is recognisable as 'contemporary' in its requirement of mobility. And yet 'mobility' is wholly inadequate in bringing forth the diversity of forced movement that delivers the global terrain as the realisation of a complex biopolitical rule – of which more later, after a few more words on hegemony.

## Angela Dimitrakaki describes how Arahmaiani's life and work expose the alliance of capitalism, religion and the state in the subjugation of women.

short essay concerns the conflicts and contradictions this hegemony generates for feminist politics in the global art field.

Coming across a vitrine juxtaposing a box of condoms, a Buddha icon and the Qur'an, one might be tempted to date the artwork to sometime after 9/11, when the history of the world began to be scripted openly along the lines of a 'clash of civilisations'.<sup>1</sup> And one would be wrong. Arahmaiani made *Etalase* (Display Case) in 1994. In terms of what neoliberal higher education now calls non-academic impact, *Etalase* would score rather high. It resulted in death threats issued by Islamic funda-

### Feminism, Criticism, Expectations

When *Etalase* was exhibited as part of 'Global Feminisms', at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2007,<sup>4</sup> *The New York Times* reviewer Roberta Smith mentioned Arahmaiani among the artists that the curators had drawn from 'the international biennial circuit'. Associated with 'the institutional stage', this circuit was one of two connected 'success platforms' from which the curators, we were told, had selected the participating artists – the other being 'the market'.<sup>5</sup> Smith's observations concerning the contexts where women artists meet 'success' should already be sufficient to raise, yet again, the issue of a feminist canon: is it an inevitable outcome of

1 The controversial phrase 'clash of civilisations' was coined by Samuel P. Huntington in 1993 ('The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22–49), and was frequently echoed in talk of George W. Bush's 'War on Terror' after 9/11.

2 Objections were raised both against *Etalase* as blasphemous art and against the painting *Lingga-Yoni* (both 1994), which pictured a Hindu symbol combining male and female genitals against a background reading 'nature is a book' scripted in Jawi. See 'A Conversation with Arahmaiani' (with Susan Syllas and Chrysanthe Stathacos), *Mommy* [blog], 20 April 2014, available at <http://www.mommybysilasandstathacos.com/2014/04/20/a-conversation-with-arahmeiani/> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

3 In 2010, Arahmaiani began a collaboration with Tibetan monks on the commons of water, a long-term project near Yushu in Tibet. See Arahmaiani Feisal, 'My Second Life in Tibet', *Art Asia Pacific*, issue 79, July–August 2012, available at [http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79\\_SecondLifeInTibet\\_Arahmaiani.pdf](http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79_SecondLifeInTibet_Arahmaiani.pdf) (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

4 'Global Feminisms', Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 23 March–1 July 2007, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. The exhibition included 87 women artists from around the world and aimed 'to move beyond the specifically Western brand of feminism that has been perceived as the dominant voice of feminist and artistic practice'. See [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global\\_feminisms/](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global_feminisms/) (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

5 Roberta Smith, 'They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar', *The New York Times*, 23 March 2007, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/arts/design/23glob.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/arts/design/23glob.html?_r=0) (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

what a feminist exhibition or art museum does?<sup>6</sup> The issue of the canon is historically specific, being inevitably implicated in an art world operating on the principle of competition as the quintessential value of capital as social relation, or what Arahmaiani defined, back in 1993, as the transformation of 'human life into a hopeless rat race, each rat struggling to reach the top of the social pyramid (the pinnacle of which is "pure materialism")'.<sup>7</sup>

The contradiction between artistic (and most likely also curatorial) intentions and the selection process identified by the reviewer is far from new. It has been the permanent headache for feminism in the art world, at least since the second wave demanded visibility for women artists in the art world's actually existing institutions. But Smith, in *The New York Times*, went on to say something more: 'Most of the work here [in 'Global Feminisms'] is essentialist, body-oriented and familiar to the point of old-fashioned. Again and again and again women fall back on making art from the thing nearest at hand that separates them from men: their bodies - and often echo their predecessors rather literally'.<sup>8</sup> Given that 'Global Feminisms' only included artists born after 1960, the above remark presumes a global history of feminist art, articulated generationally, to be not merely a curatorial argument (and as such, possibly contested) but a fact: a transnationally manifested reality of distinct national-cultural spaces living through the same historical evolution of 'feminist art', so that when this art enters a shared exhibition space its progress can be evaluated as satisfactory or not according to a unique, appropriate and universal yardstick. This art was expected to advance on the basis of a progression of recognisable themes: works that are 'body-oriented' were deemed 'old-fashioned' by 2007 - that is, they were outmoded already nine years ago.

Insofar as 'Global Feminisms' was not just an exhibition of works/projects but a showcase for feminist artists' commitments and long-term visions, Smith's remarks epitomise the problem of criteria in the reception of feminist artists' *lives* rather than just work. This has important implications for feminist methodologies, both in

academia and curatorial practice, for it shows that overcoming biography as celebration of individual difference has not necessarily led to an updating of materialist feminist approaches in art history. While materialist feminism remains the only methodological approach to art history that enables us to attend to the connection between actually lived lives and the structures, processes and conflicts that dictate life choices and patterns, it urgently needs to address the loss of distinction between work and life identified with post-Fordism as the broader context of artistic production. Besides this, the critic's demand for thematic evolution is symptomatic of feminism's entrapment in the project mentality: not only individual artists but also generations of feminists should invent 'new' projects, that is, projects of sufficient innovation. Adopting such a project-based mentality is not without contradictions when it comes to feminism. Feminist artists' lives are expected to unfold as a serial pursuit of reinvention while also sustaining a permanent political state of being. What is asked from artists such as Arahmaiani is to be unique as well as embedded in the allegedly collective advance of feminism as a global history. But global history, so far, is not one of collective advances. In fact, it is proving to be one of locally managed legacies of imperialism. Which may well be why the body, on which imperial violence is inflicted, refuses to evacuate the (art) historical scene.

### The Forces that 'Move' the Body

If *Etalase* makes an oblique reference to the body, other works by Arahmaiani - especially her performances - deploy the body in immediate terms. And as Arahmaiani has herself explained, her interest has been in the body rather than in the category of performance art (a term she was introduced to by curators visiting Indonesia from Australia and Japan in the early 1990s).<sup>9</sup> Already in 1993, she said: 'What has become the focus of my attention are the situations, the forces that "move" the body'.<sup>10</sup> This statement becomes more concrete if one considers Arahmaiani's work overall; her focus on specific historical

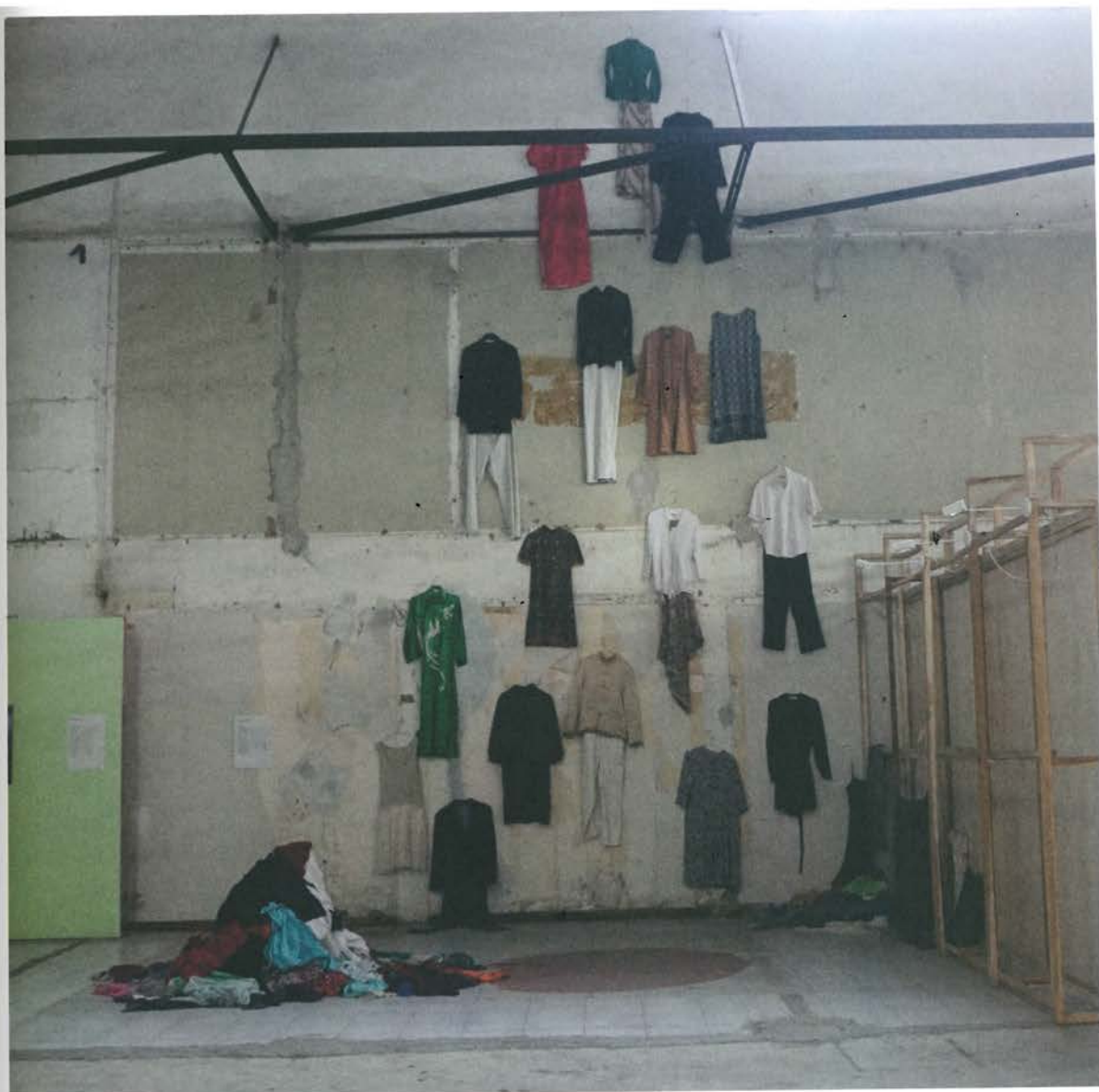
6 On the canon, feminism and capitalism in a global context, see Angela Dimitrakaki, Lara Perry et al., 'Constant Redistribution: A Roundtable on Feminism, Art and the Curatorial Field', *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, vol.2, no.2, June 2012, pp.218-41.

7 Arahmaiani, 'The Basis of My Thought Is a Concern with Balance, or the Conjunction of Opposites' (1993), unpublished manuscript.

8 R. Smith, 'They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar', *op. cit.*

9 See 'A Conversation with Arahmaiani', *op. cit.*

10 Arahmaiani, 'The Basis of My Thought Is a Concern with Balance, or the Conjunction of Opposites', *op. cit.*



Arahmaiani, *Petaka (The Disaster)*, 2015. Installation view, Jakarta Biennale, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Jakarta Biennale

events, on the passage of history as such, is unmissable. This history is often highlighted as one of ‘disaster’ – disaster that refuses to go away and in relation to which (rather than in the aftermath of which) Arahmaiani creates.

In *Petaka (The Disaster)*, 2015), the piles of ‘used’ clothes interspersed in the exhibition space, as if discarded following the death of their owners, referred not just to the hundreds of thousands tortured and killed in 1965–66 during the infamous anti-communist purge led by General Suharto, but to the ways in which a past atrocity extends itself into the present: the history textbooks where the leftist intellectuals and farmers who opposed the Suharto regime are presented as murderers rather than victims; the precari-

ous position of the Chinese minority in Indonesia, and the constantly exploited legacy of colonial rule; the regime’s former cadres’ continued spoliation of the country, now as directors of companies engaged in environmental destruction. Arahmaiani’s response, in 2013, to the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands was: ‘No, that is not true. It’s still ongoing.’<sup>11</sup> In a recent national-press article written in response to a specific incident in Yogyakarta, where she currently lives, Arahmaiani criticised the violence of Islamic fundamentalists towards the LGBT community and highlighted the centuries-old tradition of Indonesian dance wherein men publicly perform in drag.<sup>12</sup> One might say, then, that if the body continues to

11 ‘A Conversation with Arahmaiani’, *op. cit.* Arahmaiani stresses that most of the Indonesian migrant workers working in contemporary slavery conditions are women.



be present in her work, as much as in anyone's, this may well be because the body is not a 'theme' to be potentially dropped (in favour of less explored themes), but the target, register and effect of power. There is, indeed, nothing new in this, although power as such has a history.

Michel Foucault used the term 'biopower'<sup>13</sup> in connection with the techniques of power adopted by the modern nation state, but what constitutes the 'modernity' of the contemporary, twenty-first-century state is becoming increasingly complex – not least because of the state's role in what we have come to know as 'globalisation'. Far from disappearing, the state now plays an indispensable role in dividing a globally connected workforce and the equally global surplus labour reserves into management-friendly units. In 2007, the year of 'Global Feminisms', Malcolm Bull wrote in his introduction to the Spring issue of *New Left Review*: 'A selection of the most pressing political questions of the moment might include the following: Should women wear headscarves? May we buy and sell our bodily organs? How can we control the weather?'

***The paradox of art as non-deferred but actually existing critique is that art's power is recognised as 'real' first and foremost by those who hold real power.***

Whereas such issues had been associated with the uneven terrain of globalisation as geo-political process, 'now, many [such issues] are considered biopolitical in the sense that they are produced through interactions of political power with the private and the corporeal. Almost imperceptibly, globalisation has become biopolitics.'<sup>14</sup> Women, as expected, have a special role to play in this process, since their crossing from the (presumed private) space of *oikos* to the (presumed public) space of the *polis* can still be described as a struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, it is becoming understood that this crossing may not be to emancipation but to a different domain and structure of subjugation. To say that 'globalisation collapses the distinction of public and private' hardly means that this collapse takes effect in favour of women.<sup>16</sup> If anything, we are hereby forced to recognise that a key demand of feminism (this very collapse) is realised to the opposite effect when not executed in the context of a feminist politics: the collapse of private and public under the aegis of global capital has not meant the liberation of women but a general feminisation of subjects, a constant pull of so-called singularities towards the loss of the rights of the polis as the rights of the fully human. Feminism must now speak about feminised bodies in this sense. But in this globalised sphere the state is not the sole engine of disempowerment and regulator of subjugation.

**Articulations of Biopower**

Arahmaiani's prefigured, rather than deferred or belated, history of the world is important in many ways, but perhaps principally because it breaks with the tradition that sees radical art as always somehow being trapped in an 'afterwards', speaking its truth (and this can only be a social truth) from a future position.<sup>17</sup> It is this future position that will cause the oppositionality or criticality of art to be concretely experienced. *Etalase* is an example of a work that spoke a social truth in the 'here and now' of its making, and brought forth a biopolitical reception as a result. It was not the first time that the Indonesian artist experienced the impact of her art on her life. Since the early 1980s, Arahmaiani's work has consistently challenged the oppression of women by religion. I will refrain from saying that her art has consistently challenged the oppression of women 'by Islam' or 'by certain versions of Islam'. I do so not out of political correctness but rather because religion, historically and today, is the general framework sustaining patriarchal rule as

- 12 See Arahmaiani, 'Menolak Tragedi Kekerasan', *Kompas*, 12 March 2016, p.26. With thanks to Suzan Piper for providing an English translation.
- 13 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge* (1976, trans. Robert Hurley), London: Penguin, 1998.
- 14 Malcolm Bull, 'Globalization and Biopolitics: Introduction to *New Left Review* 45', *New Left Review*, no.45, May–June 2007, pp.1–2. Emphasis added.
- 15 The dominant meaning of private and public is problematised by strands of leftist feminist thought. See Endnotes, 'The Logic of Gender', *Endnotes*, issue 3, September 2013, available at <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).
- 16 M. Bull, 'Globalization and Biopolitics: Introduction to *New Left Review* 45', *op. cit.*, pp.1–2.
- 17 On the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

women's material and ideological reality of subjugation – even if in different eras and contexts one religion may appear more patriarchal than others. This typically has to do with the *degree* to which this or that religion manages to impose its rule in a given social context. What is called 'fundamentalism' can therefore appear, at least to those who represent it, as the logical extension of this primary imposition as a social consensus.

Arahmaiani would almost certainly disagree with the above position, as she does not reject religion altogether but rather defends the right to be critical of one's religion in its relation to realised social power. And as one might expect, Arahmaiani's critique is not exhausted with Islam, which is very important for negotiating *how* the critique of Islam is scripted into her art. She is also critical of capitalism, especially of its propensity to appropriate the wealth of life into the ring of consumerism. *Etalase* is also an ironic exposition of commodity fetishism, including the commodity fetishism that applies to the artwork as an assortment of 'things' brought together by the artist's singular vision and encased as 'the work'. The proximity of the condom, Qur'an, Coca-Cola bottle and other objects in the glass case is what has been perceived as offensive to a great extent – a double offence, for not only is a sacred text equated with mass-produced objects signifying 'pleasure' (condoms and Coca-Cola) but all are contained and overwritten by the authority of the artwork. However, the scenario becomes plausible only if one has the power to attribute to art the power to cause offence. The paradox of art as non-deferred but actually existing critique is this: art's power to undermine is recognised as 'real' first and foremost by those who hold real power – by which I mean power that can be evidenced in its material consequences rather than held symbolically as the promise of power.

Arahmaiani's work, its reception and the impact of this reception on the life of a 'woman artist' (if we are to retain this important historical and political category introduced decades ago by feminist art history), invites reflection on the range of

agents commanding power over life, or what is called 'biopower'. The concept of biopower has generated such widespread interest in conjunction with the biopolitical reality of capitalist globalisation and neoliberalism as to hide from view what the etymology of the term suggests. Whereas there is no doubt that capital institutes forms of governance that are biopolitical, organised religion's participation in 'techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations' is hard to refute.<sup>18</sup> The reflections that Arahmaiani's work and, crucially, life itself invite cannot but address that gender, sex and reproductive politics remain the fundamental parameters in the critique of biopower, and that on many occasions the symbiosis of religion and the state is symptomatic of the culture of alliance required for the articulation of biopower. Such an alliance grows stronger if capital joins it. Globalisation presents numerous examples where the triangle of capital-state-religion is becoming normalised. In Europe this is evident in nation states where post-socialist regimes have been adopting a model of transition that comfortably combines capitalism, the state and religion in dictating specifically the management of women's bodies (in relation to abortion, foremost).<sup>19</sup> In these cases, the religion is Christianity, which I will take as corroborating the argument that we must look at religion at large as a mechanism of combining control and discipline as well as the management of behaviour, rather than at this or that expression of theocratic rule.

The issue of religion and feminism can no longer be sidelined. Inevitably, the discussion has to encompass the troubling question of whether the idea of politics as such (including feminist politics) is compatible not just with the framework of any organised religion but with belief in a power that is placed over and above the world of human affairs, including society, history and biology. The contradiction at the heart of modern politics, that social relations are mediated both by an immanent and an extraneous power, is symptomatic of modernity's failed project of secularism; but this should not be seen as an accident. In this light, a feminist critique of religion

18 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, op. cit., p.140.

19 Indicatively, see Agence France-Presse in Warsaw, 'Protesters call for near-total ban on abortions in Poland', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/15/abortions-poland-demonstrators-call-near-total-ban> (last accessed on 5 June 2016); and Gillian Pascall and Anna Kwak, *Gender Regimes in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe*, Bristol: Polity Press, 2005.



Arahmaiani, *Nation for Sale*, 1996, installation and performance. Performance view, 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia, 1996. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

that does not disregard religion – such as that practiced by Arahmaiani – is not a non sequitur but rather a form of critical pragmatism as the ground for politics. And this includes feminist politics. It is a critique that confronts the actuality of power not only in the ‘external’ environment but also in the processes and sedimentations of internalisation – in what used to be called ‘ideology’.

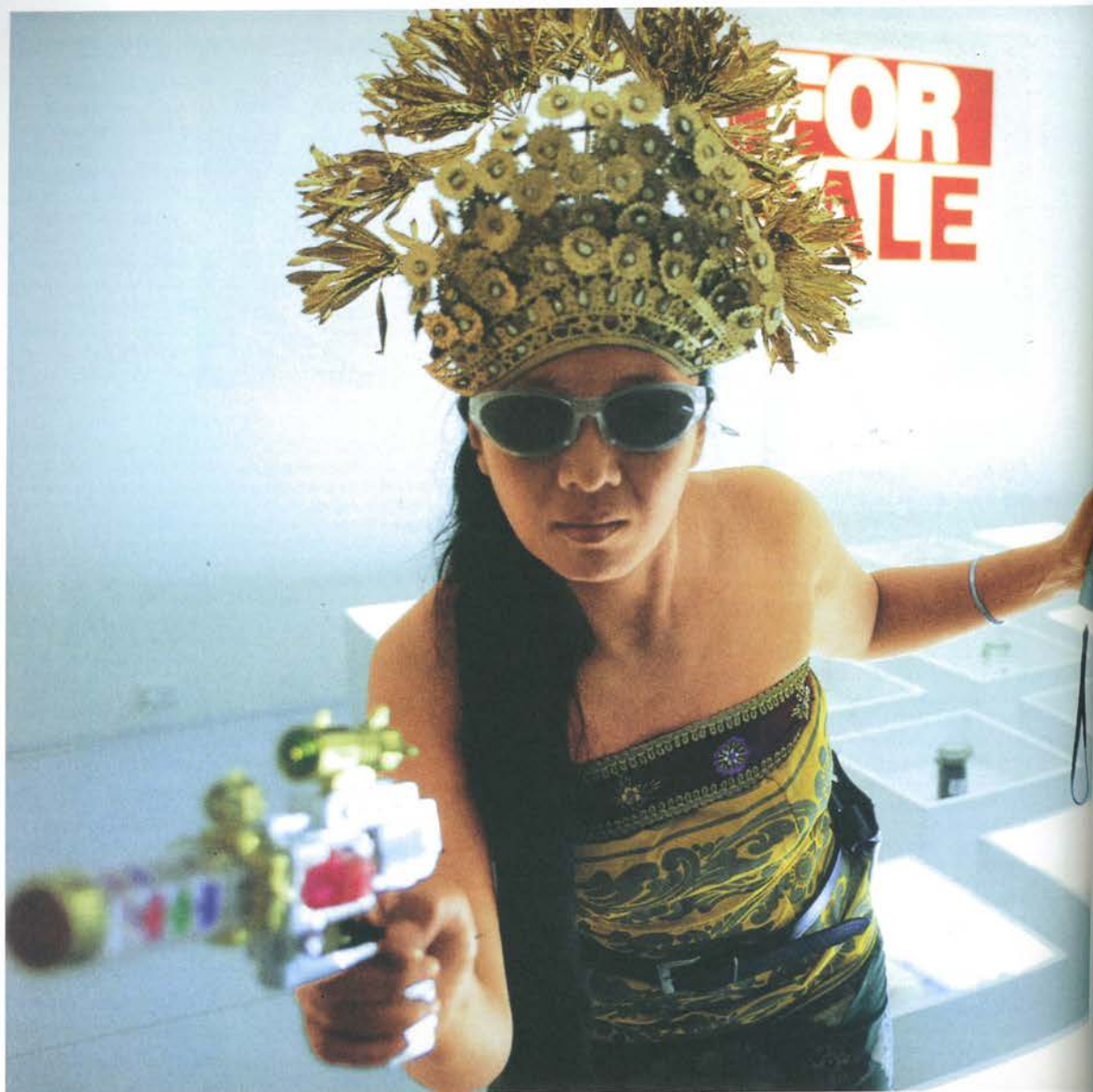
#### A Return to Ideology?

Ideology, in its Marxist apprehension as the set of naturalised ideas covering the reality of social relations that must be reproduced to the benefit of the ruling class, was once a core term of feminist art history, at least as thought and written in Europe and North America in the 1970s and 80s. Progressively, and as the tensions of societies made to operate for global capital became apparent, from the 1990s onwards – and at an accelerated pace since the ‘crisis’ of 2008 – ideology has fallen into gradual disuse. Who needs to understand the formation of subjectivity through the naturalisation of values and ensuing interpellations (to remember Louis Althusser) when both subjects and values end up reproducing a

planetary social reality strewn by devastating hyperproduction (and therefore consumption) and unbridled dispossession? The systemic ills arising from global capitalism are plain for all to see, and as regards the position of most women, suffice to download data from the World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO) websites.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, the ‘position of most women’ is generated by the culture of alliance among current forms and institutions of biopolitical governance. This alliance may be expressed according to whatever variety of forms, ‘local’ parameters or customs, but women continue to carry the burden of gendered oppression. In her 1997 performance *Handle without Care*, a video record of which is held at the re.act.feminism performance archive, the commentary on the alliance was obvious. It is worth giving the archive’s description of the work:

*The performance takes place on top of a hill just before sunset. The artist, clad in an elaborate ceremonial outfit, performs Balinese dance movements around a white circle painted on the ground with a large bottle of Coca-Cola*

20 The ILO has reported that in 2016: ‘Inequality between women and men persists in global labour markets, in respect of opportunities, treatment and outcomes. Over the last two decades, women’s significant progress in educational achievements has not translated into a comparable improvement in their position at work. In many regions in the world, in comparison to men, women are more likely to become and remain unemployed, have fewer chances to participate in the labour force and [...] have to accept lower quality jobs’, and ‘between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 per cent’. The same report stresses that women do most of the ‘unpaid care and household work’. International Labour Organization, *Women at Work, Trends 2016: Executive Summary*, Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2016, p.3.



standing upright in the middle. The artist, wearing black sunglasses, holds two plastic toy guns in her hands, incorporating them as ritual elements of the dance. During the performance she shakes the Coke bottle and eventually opens it with an explosion of pent-up carbonation that spills into the smaller circle. Mantras can be heard on a CD player, whose singing mixes with the electronic sounds of the guns, producing a cacophony of sound. Through a game of extremes between sacred and profane, between the religious objects and the cheap ones of mass consumption, Arahmaiani introduces dissonant

elements in her interpretation of society and questions its ritualisation, reflecting on its tensions and contradictions.<sup>21</sup>

As a totalising enterprise, globalisation (a term whose glorious ascent to ubiquity began around the time of this performance) is the expert field where dissonant elements come into confluence to bring forth a specific, if formidable in scale, organisation and management of, well, dissonance. Globalisation overcomes what postmodernism delivered as 'surrealism without the unconscious', in the unforgettable expression of Fredric Jameson.<sup>22</sup> Rather, each fragment finds its place, arranged by the

21 Arahmaiani, 'Handle without Care' (1997), *re.act feminism #2* [website], available at <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=231&e=&v=&a=&t=> (last accessed on 5 May 2016). Emphasis added.

22 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp.67-97.

Arahmaiani, *Handle without Care*, 1996. Performance view, 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia, 1996. Photograph: Mani Sriwanichpoom. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

alliance of biopower to fairly specific effects – the overarching of them dubbed a more or less operative ‘empire’ despite capital’s crises.<sup>23</sup> The ‘cheap’ objects of ‘mass consumption’ used by Arahmaiani in her performance are also objects of mass production and cheap labour. The ‘game of extremes between sacred and profane’ is a prophesy of the nineteenth century, worded back then as ‘all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned’.<sup>24</sup> It is *The Communist Manifesto*’s remarkably accurate prediction about turbulence in the twenty-first century. But curiously, globalisation as the ground where holy things become profaned is also where human beings are held increasingly hostage to the biopolitics of holiness. The return to a certain kind of surrealism is undeniable, except that now the designation applies to the *autonomisation* of the economy from politics as a real-life vanguard generated out of capital’s dynamism, on the one hand, and to increasingly persuasive articulation of capitalism’s materialism with religion’s promise of post-life exodus through immateriality, on the other. Arahmaiani’s art addresses the failure of any such synthesis.

### **In Conclusion, Nothing Is Left Behind**

What can feminism learn from Arahmaiani’s art and life story? And more importantly, perhaps, how can feminism avoid marginalising it as a challenging anomaly to canonised expectations about how feminist art history ought to be proceeding? What is to be done with an embodied paradigm that is ‘different’ to the one already normalised in, and through, feminism – a political discourse and praxis that, in addition to other ruptures, has succeeded in creating its own periodisation of art’s history? I am purposefully using the singular ‘history’ to refer to an evolving narrative about contemporary art. Yet this is not to propose a false unity of simultaneous feminist activity in relation to it, but rather to indicate a political reluctance to concede to a compartmentalised articulation of the rebelliousness of feminist consciousness. High globalisation and its biopolitical matrix of power disallow the fiction of such compartmentalisation. Effectively, globalisation as biopolitics compels us to do away with the idea not of the new but of the old.

There is no old subject matter. There is nothing old in a mode of production that has a place for everything and everyone. There’s just constant synchronisation and its setbacks, which social struggles must strive to make the most of. Hence the importance of Arahmaiani’s prefigured history of the world. Her long-term politics appears to be located in exposing the contradictions this intricate administrative regime is most eager to accommodate. And feminism in the art field can, and must, register, politically, what this accommodation holds for the subjects that get caught in the impossibility of completing this process.

23 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

24 Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848, trans. Samuel Moore), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).



Arahmaiani,  
*Offerings from A to Z*,  
1996. Performance  
view, Padaeng  
Crematorium,  
Chiang Mai,  
Thailand. Courtesy  
the artist and  
Indonesian Visual  
Art Archive (IVAA),  
Yogyakarta

# Arahmaiani: Challenging the Status Quo

– Wulan Dirgantoro

In her contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art' (2007) at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, art historian Joan Kee critiques how the complexity of Asian women artists' work is flattened out within an international context. She notes how international art critics and curators have

of religion. Yet a closer analysis of the artist's body of work shows that Arahmaiani's challenge to the status quo is inextricable from the complex web of ethical, social and political meanings that the female body carries in the Indonesian context.

Arahmaiani grew up in a predominantly Muslim, middle-class family in Bandung, West Java. She went to the Faculty of Fine Arts, Bandung Institute of Technology to study painting, and turned to performance art after joining an experimental body art group called Sumber Waras (loosely translated as 'Fountain of Wellbeing'). The group's approach to the interplay of body art, theatre and sociopolitical critique often took them to the streets of Bandung, where they could escape their art school's stifling conservatism. It was outside of school, in the library of Indonesia's foremost feminist scholar, Toeti Heraty, that Arahmaiani was introduced to discussions of gender and sexuality. In February 1981, she spent two days and nights with a group of fellow students in the streets of Bandung wrapping lamp posts with blood-red lengths of cloth, tracing silhouettes on the tarmac and distributing flyers with the death statistics of illegal racing on the main thoroughfare of Bandung.<sup>3</sup> The happening, titled *Kecelakaan (Accident)*, caused much controversy in the art school. Two years later, she ruffled feathers again when she and two male friends made chalk drawings on the street of tanks, weapons and other military equipment on the day marking Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands, in clear allusion to the military rule of Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98). Arahmaiani was arrested immediately after the performance and released one month later, after signing a form stating that she was mentally disturbed – a ruse organised by

## Wulan Dirgantoro situates Arahmaiani's work in the context of current feminist struggles in Indonesia.

tended to focus on artworks that are illustrative either of an art movement that can be assimilated into Western art historical models or of a specific sociopolitical context, thereby reducing the art of the region to a handful of themes. Kee discusses Arahmaiani's performance *Offerings from A to Z* (1996) as representative of one such trope: 'the artwork as a challenge to the systems that attempt to order women according to imposed agendas'.<sup>1</sup> In this performance, realised in Thailand at the Padaeng Crematorium as part of Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), the artist first laid herself down amongst weaponry and other items, then on a stone table used for washing corpses, surrounded by black-and-white images of scantily dressed heterosexual couples in erotic poses. 'Standing at ground level and looking down at her body,' Kee writes, 'the viewer unwittingly becomes complicit in the death of the artist. The subsequent documentary photograph ... only confirms the centrality of sacrifice. It neither offers nor corroborates other interpretative possibilities.'<sup>2</sup> Kee appears to criticise Arahmaiani's work for merely conforming to stereotype, in this case the sacrifice of women in the name

1 See Joan Kee, 'What is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women's Art?', in Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (ed.), *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), London and New York: Merrell Publishers and Brooklyn Museum, 2007, p.111.

2 *Ibid.*

3 For more on this work, see F.X. Harsono, 'Kerakyatan dalam Seni Lukis Indonesia: Sejak PERSAGI hingga Kini', in Wicaksono Adi, Sumartono et al. (ed.), *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia: Politik dan Gender*, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2001, p.76; and Carla Bianpoen, Wulan Dirgantoro and Farah Wardani, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, Jakarta: Yayasan Seni Rupa Indonesia, 2007, p.43.



a friend. Fearing for her safety, Arahmaiani left the country, first for Australia and later for the Netherlands, where she pursued her art education.<sup>4</sup>

A decade later, it was not the military but Islamist hardliners who took offence at two works shown as part of Arahmaiani's solo exhibition 'Sex, Religion and Coca Cola' (1994) at Oncor Studio in Jakarta. The painting *Lingga-Yoni* (1994) depicts the Hindu symbols *yonis* and *lingam*, reminiscent of female and masculine organs respectively, against a scripted background in Arabic and *jawi* – an Arabic script used for writing in Malay and other Southeast Asian languages, which was originally used to relay religious content during the spread of Islam. The first line of the script reads 'nature is a book', and the artist has stated that the painting reflects on how nature can be understood and read through symbols – like a book.<sup>5</sup> But the spiritual dimension of the work fell on deaf ears at the time, with Islamist hardliners denouncing the depiction of the genitals as obscene.

*Etalase* (*Display Case*, 1994) was even more controversial. Here the artist placed several objects together within a display case, ranging from religious items such as a Buddha statue and the Qur'an to everyday consumables such as a Coca-Cola bottle and a pack of condoms. The work was intended to criticise the commercialisation of religion in Indonesia, but it was the association of sex and Islam that offended. After receiving death threats, the artist fled Indonesia again to Australia, where she continued her studies, after which she led an internationally nomadic life for nearly a decade.

Arahmaiani has become known as a feminist artist, both in Indonesia and overseas, owing to her willingness to tackle thorny issues such as religion, violence, the state and patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> While in the international art system this may be an appealing label, as per Kee's suggestion, in Indonesia, where feminists are painted almost comically as militant, angry women, such an epithet can seriously hinder an artist's career. Even if the current market interest in Indonesian

Arahmaiani, *Kecelakaan I* (*Accident I*), 1981, performance. Courtesy the artist and Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), Yogyakarta

4 Arahmaiani attended the Paddington Art School, Australia (1983–85) and Akademie voor Beeldende Kunst en Vormgeving, Enschede, the Netherlands (1991–92).

5 See 'A Conversation with Arahmaiani' (with Susan Silas and Chrysanne Stachatos), in *Mommy* [blog], <http://www.mommybysilasandstachatos.com/2014/04/20/a-conversation-with-arahmaiani/> (last accessed on 24 July 2016).

6 Arahmaiani has noted that it was probably Michael O'Ferrall, the late curator of Asian and Aboriginal Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth who first labelled her a feminist artist, quite possibly in 1995 during her time at Claremont School of Art, Perth. Unpublished manuscript in the artist's personal archive. See also A. Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', in A. Poshyananda (ed.), *Contemporary Art in Asia: Tradition/Tension*, New York: Asia Society, p.46.

contemporary art has brought to the fore a growing number of female collectors, curators, gallery owners and managers, this trend does not necessarily close the dramatic gender imbalance affecting most art institutions in Indonesia, from museums and galleries through to academia and the press – most Indonesian women artists still rely on male-dominated patronage networks in order to advance their careers.<sup>7</sup>

Feminism in Indonesia has long been associated with 'unnatural' political activism, which dates back to the New Order's demonisation of the women's organisation Gerwani (short for Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or Indonesian Women's Movement).<sup>8</sup> The New Order of General Suharto took over President Sukarno's government following a failed coup on 30 September 1965, when six high-ranking army officers were kidnapped and executed. Though the coup had been orchestrated from within the military, General Suharto accused the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and affiliated organisations such as Gerwani of being behind the attempt;<sup>9</sup> a brutal anti-communist purge followed, which would claim the life of half million people in Indonesia, and paved the way for General Suharto's overthrow of Sukarno in 1966.<sup>10</sup> The mass killings of PKI and Gerwani members (real or imagined) were legitimised by accusations of sexual debauchery, allegedly committed by Gerwani members during the murders of military officers. Though the New Order's vilification of Gerwani was part of a campaign to whip up anti-communist sentiment, its impact still reverberates.<sup>11</sup> Indonesian women artists struggle today with the stigmatisation of progressive, politically active women, and also the condemnation of the female body more generally.<sup>12</sup>

Following the fall of Suharto in May 1998, Arahmaiani began a series of works involving the female body. First performed in the French Cultural Centre in Bandung in 1999, the performance *Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo* (*Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo*) exposes the artist's body to physical intervention by inviting the audience to write on her body. Video documentation shows the artist onstage wearing a traditional red-lace blouse (*kebaya*) and humming to the tune of an Islamic devotional song (*shalawat*) while playing a handheld traditional drum (*rebana*). She tells the audience that she is always required to appear beautiful and proceeds to apply a light make-up whilst describing her action to the audience, though she immediately shows her dissatisfaction. Then she draws a thin moustache with eyeliner, drinks from a bottle of Coca-Cola and provocatively asks the audience to tell her what to do next. She later appears wearing only a dark corset, standing with both arms outstretched, while a male member of the audience writes on her chest. Other members of the audience come forward to write on different parts of her body as she encourages them to write their thoughts freely; some participants put the *kebaya* back on the artist, others take it off again. By the performance's end, the *kebaya* has been torn apart and the artist's hair is dishevelled.

By allowing male participants to touch her body – and most of the participants in the 1999 performance were male – the artist intentionally transgresses the sociocultural norms of Indonesia's Muslim-majority society. In a stricter interpretation of Islam, women and men are forbidden to touch each other if they are not related by blood or marriage; thus the content of this work

7 Patronage has often been perceived as one of the quickest ways for young artists in Indonesia to advance their careers. For example, Toeti Heraty established Cemara 6 Gallery and Café in Jakarta in 1993 to focus on Indonesian women artists in particular. Since 2003 the gallery has broadened its exhibition programme.

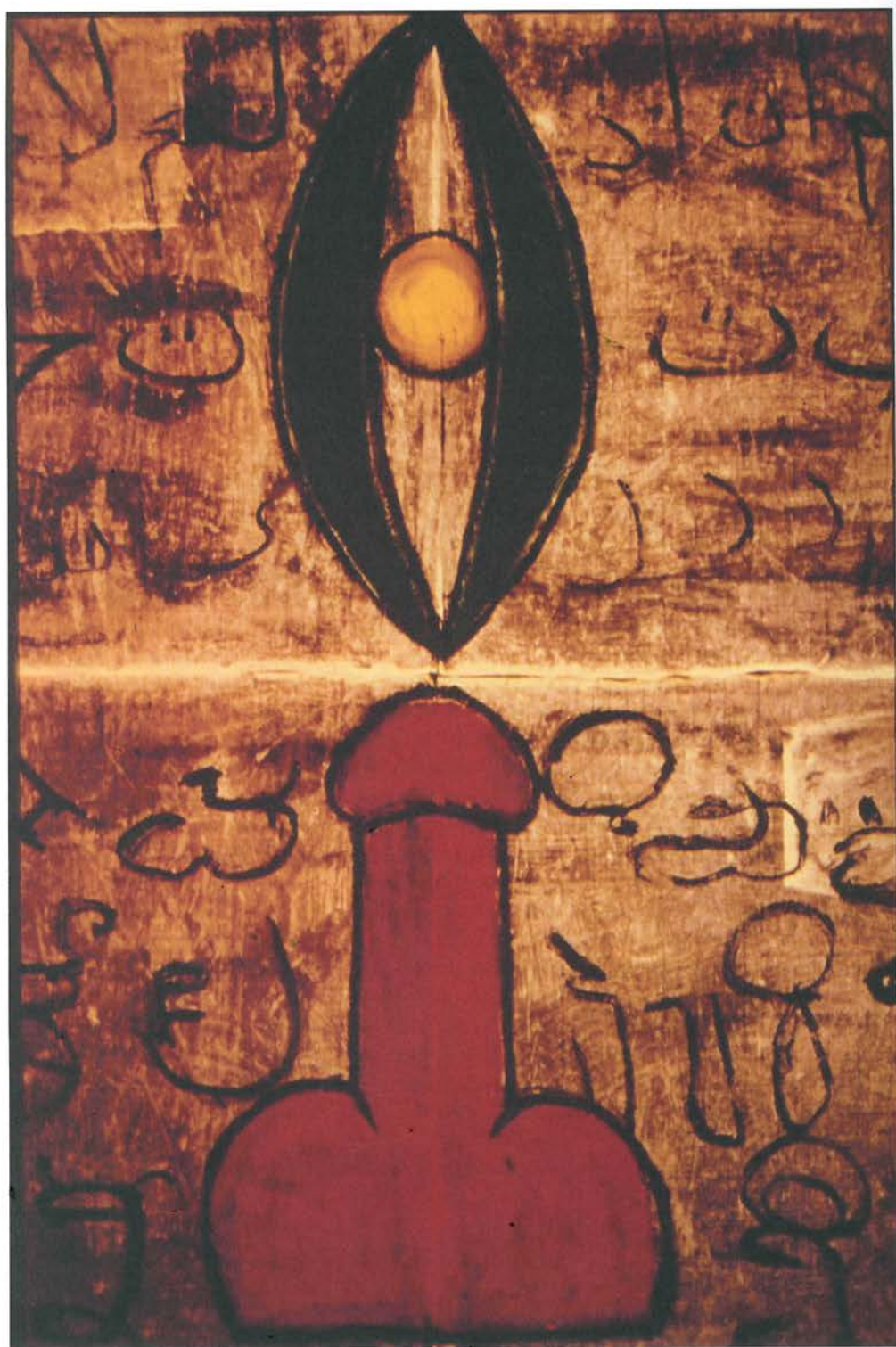
8 Gerwani was the biggest Indonesian women's movement in 1950–65, and its main aim was to reach equality with men. The organisation did this initially by combating illiteracy and supporting education for women, setting up childcare facilities and kindergartens and advocating for marriage reform, before shifting its focus to equal labour rights for women and equal responsibilities in the struggle for 'full national independence' and socialism. See Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, New York and The Hague: Palgrave/Macmillan and Institute of Social Studies, 2002, p.140.

9 At the height of its activities in 1963, Gerwani claimed to have three million members, many closely affiliated with the PKI.

10 See Katherine McGregor and Vanessa Hearman, 'Challenges of Political Rehabilitation in Post-New Order Indonesia: the case of Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement)', *South East Asia Research*, vol.15, issue 3, pp.365–66.

11 Saskia Wieringa has argued that the main sticking point was Gerwani's campaign for women to become politically active, though some Gerwani members' opposition to polygamy may have also antagonised sections of the Muslim community. See S. Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, op. cit., p.7.

12 Melani Budianta has shown that women's movements during the post-1998 Reformasi period attempted to break free from the stereotype of the militant feminist by engaging with women from diverse classes, religions and ethnic backgrounds. See M. Budianta, 'The Blessed Tragedy: The making of women's activism during the Reformasi years', in A. Heryanto and S.K. Mandal (ed.), *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp.145–77.



Arahmaiani, *Lingga-Yoni*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 × 140cm. Courtesy the artist and Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), Yogyakarta

Overleaf:  
Arahmaiani,  
*Offerings from A to Z*,  
1996. Performance  
view, Padaeng  
Crematorium, Chiang  
Mai. Courtesy the  
artist and Indonesian  
Visual Art Archive  
(IVAA), Yogyakarta

straddles the (in)visible markers of the political and the personal. Arahmaiani has stated that in exhibiting her body and letting others touch her, she is crossing boundaries that are not only personal but also material, namely, the fragility of (women's) bodies under the threat of invasion and violence.<sup>13</sup> Arahmaiani actively encourages the audience to participate in the performance, thus sanctioning transgression on her body and choosing to stand as a speaking subject

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rather than conforming to the passive-female stereotype. The title references Dayang Sumbi, a Sundanese mythological figure of pre-Islamic origin whose story bears similarity with that of Oedipus.<sup>14</sup> Following a series of events and misfortunes, Dayang Sumbi is about to marry her long-lost son, Sangkuriang. Upon realising this, she gives her son a series of impossible tasks; when he is about to complete them, she asks the gods to turn her into a flower. In stating 'Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo', Arahmaiani challenges the embodiment of the feminine as an erotic and fatal object.

In *His-story* (2000-01), first performed in 2000 at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival, the role of the artist's body further shifts from a receptacle of thoughts into a kind of cathartic medium. The performance starts with Arahmaiani sitting in front of a small table. She faces the audience and slowly covers her face with a piece of tissue, which she then blows at repeatedly until a hole opens in it. She later pulls the petals off a red rose, takes her shirt off and pens the words 'exploitation' on her inner right arm and 'abuse of power' across her chest. She goes on to light a cigarette and

smoke it, contemplating the cigarette in her fingers. Slowly the artist stands up, takes a handgun from the table and aims it at her right temple. She stands in this position for a few minutes before slowly closing her eyes, placing the gun on the table and exiting the stage. Performing the piece at Art Space Osaka in 2001, Arahmaiani wrote the word 'inferno' on a piece of tissue and 'domination' on her right arm.

In literally inscribing institutional violence on her own body for *His-story*, Arahmaiani reflects upon the imbalanced relationship between the individual and the state in Indonesia, where vulnerable bodies are both pawn and victim in a struggle for power. As the artist has stated, she uses her body to represent subaltern subjects:

*I try to address the complex issue of violence – and how it merges with militarism, genocide, rape of women, abuse of the 'weak' and anarchy in general – into my performance. I don't know how effective this kind of work and action will be. But I know that I've got to do and to say something about it.*<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, whilst *His-story* deeply relies on the visualisation of the female body, it is not conceived as a blank canvas but rather as what Meiling Cheng has called a 'speaking sight'.<sup>16</sup> In response to Peggy Phelan's call for feminism to bypass the politics of visibility altogether – to make the female body actively absent – Cheng argues that political representation must be construed both visually and textually.<sup>17</sup> The subject should not become invisible, thereby risking suppression and erasure; rather, she should be made present through an articulation of image and voice. Similarly, I would argue that the visualisation of the female body in Arahmaiani's work must be understood in relation to her use of writing. In a context in which female bodies have all but disappeared from public purview, she makes hers visible as a social and political context – one constantly overdetermined by the violence of the state. As one of the documentation images of *His-story* states, 'there is a clear connection between the history [of] violence –

13 Unpublished manuscript held in the artist's archive.

14 See Henry Spiller, 'Ronggeng and Desire', *Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp.76-77.

15 Artist's statement, 2000, available in the artist's archive.

16 See Meiling Cheng, 'Renaming Untitled Flesh/Marking the politics of marginality', in Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (ed.), *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.207-08.

17 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.







and the body'. Thus there can be no such thing as an 'unmarked' body, to borrow Phelan's term. The question is rather, how are women marked, and by whom?

*Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo* and *His-story* were both conceived during the Reformasi period, a small window of time when Indonesians experienced a sense of freedom following the collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime in May 1998. This period allowed Indonesians to explore, and even accept, critical, alternative views on women. Major group exhibitions of Indonesian women artists were staged during this period,<sup>18</sup> featuring works by artists such as Mella Jaarsma, Titarubi and Dolorosa Sinaga which depicted previously sensitive issues such as female nudes, sexuality and domestic violence – although religious issues and the mass killings of 1965–66 remained untouched. During this period, the largest national newspaper, *Kompas*, ran a regular section on gender-related topics, reporting on issues that

would have been problematic to discuss on national media during the New Order. While the expectation that women should fulfil their roles as wives and mothers as part of their predestined fate (*kodrat*) has largely receded since the fall of Suharto, the notion of passive and controlled femininity persists in Indonesian society today, the control of women's bodies now being the prerogative of religious authorities rather than the state.<sup>19</sup> Since 2001, for example, sharia by-laws in the province of Aceh have dramatically clamped down on women's rights, whilst a controversial anti-pornography law passed in 2008 has targeted the representation of women's bodies in the visual and performing arts.<sup>20</sup>

Arahmaiani has recently turned her attention once again to the way in which religion polices subjectivity. While her critique of the overdetermination of women's bodies has always been interlinked with critique of religious extremism, an incident in 2002 cast new light on the artist's

Above and opposite:  
Arahmaiani,  
*His-story*, 2000–01,  
performance.  
Courtesy the artist

18 These included large survey shows such as 'Pameran Seni Rupa Karya Perempuan' ('Women's Art Exhibition'), Bentara Budaya Jakarta, 17–28 May 2001; 'Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang' ('Women and the Dissemination of Space'), National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 24 April–3 May 2001; and 'Pameran Seni Rupa Perempuan' ('Women's Art Exhibition'), TIM Gallery, Jakarta, 5–11 April 2003. Notable smaller thematic shows were Titarubi's solo show 'Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil' ('Shadows of the Tiniest Kind'), Cemara 6 Gallery, Jakarta, 15 March–14 April 2004; and 'Seduction (Boys Don't Cry)', Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, 19 June–7 July 2003.

19 See, for example, Julia Suryakusuma, 'Is state ibuism still relevant?', *Inside Indonesia*, edition 109, July–September 2012, available at <http://www.insideindonesia.org/is-state-ibuism-still-relevant-2> (last accessed on 24 July 2016).

20 See Pam Allen, 'Challenging Diversity?: Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 31, issue 2, 2007, pp. 101–15.





Arahmaiani, *Flag Project*, 2006–ongoing. Clockwise, from top left: Yogyakarta, 2009; Singapore, 2009; Berlin, 2006; Nagano, Japan, 2007; Sydney, 2007; Shenzhen, 2008; Borobudur, Central Java, 2007; Berlin, 2006. Courtesy the artist

relationship to Islam. During a stopover in the US en route to Canada, the artist, who did not have a transit visa, was detained and forced to spend the night in a hotel room accompanied by a male guard. The experience – which was reconstructed in her performance installation work *11 June 2002* at the Venice Biennale in 2003 – made her realise that whereas she was previously known as a female artist or Indonesian artist, she would now also be recognised for her Muslim identity.<sup>21</sup> In subsequent works, she has sought to counter the stigmatisation of Islam and to defend the rights of religious and ethnic minorities across Asia. For her exhibition 'I Love You (After Joseph Beuys's Social Sculpture)' at Singapore's Esplanade in 2009, for example, Arahmaiani showed two projects addressing the ethnic tensions that have long plagued the city state.<sup>22</sup> A series of soft and bright sculptures made from silk in the form of various *jawi* characters and reading 'I Love You', *I Love You (After Joseph Beuys Social Sculpture)* (2009) was made in collaboration with the silk-weaving Baan Krua Muslim community, of Cambodian descent, who have been targeted by the Thai government's plans to regenerate areas of Bangkok.<sup>23</sup> In Singapore, Arahmaiani also staged an iteration of her long-term *Flag Project* (2006–ongoing),<sup>24</sup> for which the artist collaborates with different communities to make colourful flags, each emblazoned with a word; Arahmaiani and her collaborators then carry these in collective performances in public spaces. For this iteration, participants walked across the heavily commercialised and regulated space of the Esplanade arts complex, brandishing flags along the way with words such as 'home', 'family' and 'freedom' written in

Chinese, Tagalog and Malay, so as to raise awareness about the status of minorities in Singapore.

In this way, Arahmaiani's engagement with the politics of women's visibility continues to carry deep significance in Indonesia, even as her performances do not always reach the local constituencies she intends to address. For the artist, the struggle for women's equality involves a class struggle, and she has repeatedly criticised the Indonesian academics and scholars whom she sees as affirming middle-class privilege.<sup>25</sup> Yet, her work operates within the very class structure she is trying to challenge.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, there is no 'other' kind of audience for Indonesian contemporary art within Indonesia, since contemporary art is predominantly made by and for the Indonesian middle-to-upper class, especially in light of the recent growth of the art market. Problematically, while Arahmaiani's work bears witness to gender inequalities in Indonesia's patriarchal society, its resonance as feminist art is diminished by its limited circulation within the country.

Yet the symbolic battle is also clearly far from over. From her early efforts to regain representative control over women's bodies to her more recent interrogation of monolithic representations of Islam, Arahmaiani has mined the complex relationship of language, power and representation within Indonesian political and social life. If it is true that her work challenges the status quo, as Kee suggests, that challenge is in itself an attack against the binary confirmation/contestation that underpins curatorial and critical stereotypes.

- 21 See Iola Lenzi, 'Context, content and meaning: threads of perception beyond the veil', in I. Lenzi (ed.), *Stitching the Wound*, Bangkok: The Art Center at the Jim Thompson House, 2006, p.18.
- 22 Singapore has seen a number of race riots since the 1960s; the most recent took place in 2013. As of June 2015, the majority of the population was ethnic Chinese (73.4%), with Malay (13.3%) and Indian (9.1%) making up the rest. See 'Population Trends 2015', Department of Statistics Singapore, available at [http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications\\_and\\_papers/population\\_and\\_population\\_structure/population2015.pdf](http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2015.pdf) (last accessed on 24 July 2016).
- 23 See Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 'Defending Muslim Community, Strengthening Thai Society', in I. Lenzi (ed.), *Stitching the Wound*, op. cit., pp.51–57. Arahmaiani's consistent use of *jawi* script and the references to Javanese mythologies in her work reflect her strong interest in the hybrid form of Islam that emerged in Indonesia during the fourteenth century. She argues that early Islam fostered equality and tolerance, in contrast to the aristocratic Hindu Buddhist rulers, something that is lacking in Indonesia these days. Conversation with the artist, February 2013. See also Merle Ricklefs, 'Non-indigenous Actors Old and New', *A New History of Southeast Asia*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp.124–25.
- 24 Arahmaiani visited Tibet as part of her research for the group exhibition 'Contemporaneity: Contemporary Art of Indonesia' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai in 2010. Though her research was initially related to the *Flag Project*, her meetings there led her to develop an ongoing environmental project with Tibetan Buddhist monks from Lab village, Yushu region. See Arahmaiani Feisal, 'My Second Life in Tibet', *Art Asia Pacific*, issue 79, July–August 2012, available at [http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79\\_SecondLifeInTibet\\_Arahmaiani.pdf](http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79_SecondLifeInTibet_Arahmaiani.pdf) (last accessed on 24 July 2016).
- 25 Arahmaiani, 'Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin', in W. Adi, Sumartono et al. (ed.), *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia: Politik dan Gender*, op. cit., pp.165–76.
- 26 *Ibid.*