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Endurance and Overcoming in the Art of Amron Omar and Melati Suryodarmo:

Invoking Uncommon Alignments for Contemporary Southeast Asian Art History

MICHELLE ANTOINETTE

Motivated by the potential of Southeast Asian intra-regional comparisons, this article considers the art practice of two Southeast Asian artists who are influenced by different cultural contexts and from different generational cohorts, but who share affinity in their mutual explorations of “the body” and “the self” in their art. I discuss the art of Malaysian artist Amron Omar (b. 1957), recognised for his paintings and drawings since the 1980s and widely regarded as one of Malaysia’s most accomplished figurative artists, and Indonesia-born artist Melati Suryodarmo (b. 1969), whose contemporary avant-garde performance art came to international prominence in the early 2000s.

While Amron has developed his art largely from within Malaysia, Suryodarmo has made Germany her second home, living and working between Indonesia and Europe. Amron’s two-dimensional paintings and drawings trace a 30-year-long focus on the subject matter of *silat*, the traditional Malay martial art of self-defence, of which Amron is a practitioner, and of which his father was a noted master. As I will outline below, while Amron’s *silat* artworks

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repeatedly depict the theatre of two male figures entangled in *silat* motion, they are actually dual self-portraits expressing the artist's personal efforts to comprehend and negotiate the contradictory characteristics of his human self. Suryodarmo's performance art practice, on the other hand, reflects her training in the Japanese dance theatre of Butoh under choreographer Anzu Furukuawa, and contemporary avant-garde performance art as a student of famed US-based Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović, and appropriates the staging techniques of photographic and theatrical production. Alongside this, however, is the important influence of her Indonesian cultural context, especially her family background and upbringing in traditional Javanese dance and meditative performance techniques. Like Amron, Suryodarmo's art is often a vehicle for coming to terms with conflicting aspects of her identity, particularly understanding her identity as a woman within her Indonesian cultural context, but also cross-culturally between Indonesia and Germany. Moreover, as with Amron, Suryodarmo's art enquires into the effect of time on our understanding of self. For Amron, this is primarily tested through the passage of decades of self-reflection via the cumulative and repeating subject of *silat* and the slow, focused time and disciplined control in creating each individual art work; for Suryodarmo, the concept of long-durational time and slow, deliberate and repeating actions are features of her performance art approach, to test the limits of the physical, psychological and emotional self. Of course, in exploring themes of the self and identity, both artists reflect a common theme throughout art history; however, I will here explore, within the regional frame of contemporary Southeast Asian art history, specific contexts and discourses positioning each artist's practice.

There is an unexplored *methodological* discomfort for contemporary Southeast Asian art history in connecting these seemingly different artists with their respective artistic trajectories and socio-cultural contexts of practice, who belong to different generations. This article challenges such epistemic discomfort, instead proposing that such uncharacteristic intra-regional comparisons might offer critical generative potential for new readings of Southeast Asian art history and therefore help expand existing approaches and methods for engaging with Southeast Asian art, regionally.

I follow the lead of Southeast Asia art historians, including T.K. Sabapathy, Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Mohd Zain, Niranjan Rajah, Ahmad Mashadi and Patrick D. Flores, to think through art historical "moments of regionality"¹ for Southeast Asia, in this case connecting Indonesian and Malaysian cultural contexts. As Mashadi has offered, "To regard Southeast Asia as a geo-cultural category is to negotiate its regionality."² Negotiating Southeast Asian

regionality, as Mashadi elaborates, has predominantly occurred via cultural mapping and exchange projects hinged on regional connectivity—the comparison of similar aesthetic and political reference points across Southeast Asia so as to engender positions of regional collectivity and cultural congruency. Most obviously, the ASEAN-sponsored exhibition projects, as Thai art historian and curator Apinan Poshyananda (1993) has argued, are largely cultural diplomacy projects designed to smooth over cultural difference and enhance economic and security cooperation in the region.

While such regionally-focused projects emphasise cross-cultural, regional connections,³ sometimes in an effort to delineate unique regional aesthetic interests (for instance, articulation of the “Nanyang” school of art as argued by Sabapathy⁴ and Piyadasa,⁵ among others), it is also concerned with utilising the regional frame as a device for unpacking and deconstructing established narratives of art history and curatorial discourses. It is with this dual intent that I connect Amron and Suryodarmo in this article, seeking to probe what generative art historical possibilities (both comforting and discomfoting) may arise through their relation and comparison, indexing moments of regional articulation and disarticulation.

The specific comparative model I offer here, contrasting Amron and Suryodarmo, opens a space for negotiating Southeast Asian art history through less obvious correlates of comparison. Regional comparisons are often framed via periodic alignments (artists working in the same “generational cohorts”),⁶ shared artistic styles, movements and genres (for example, the differentiated motivations and manifestations of abstract art across Southeast Asia),⁷ gendered connection (for example, examination of women artists across Asia)⁸ and socio-political links marking the history of the region.⁹ In this article, the case for comparing Amron and Suryodarmo springs, in the first instance, from the aesthetic connection between these two artists, each similarly interested in exploring the subject matter and themes of the body and self, the performing body, and the effect of time across art and life. From this basis, the individual contexts for each artist’s respective practice is explored—their particular socio-cultural influences, artistic modalities and trajectories, and position within existing art historical discourses. In so doing, my intention is to bring together both aesthetic and cultural considerations as a means for understanding the complex web of influences on our present understanding of these artists’ practices. Further, I suggest that recognising the artists’ mutual aesthetic interests as the initial point of departure for further analysis helps bring into relief art historical currents which might otherwise be left unexamined, or curtailed in art historical projects which foreground the politics of identity as their starting point.

Key anchor points frame this comparison. First, is the artists' mutual focus on the human body in their respective art practices—not only the body “depicted” but also the body which is moved to create art and moved by art. There is also the gendered body, that is Suryodarmo's use of her own socialised “female” body and Amron's focus on the “ethnicised”, “male” body. A further consideration is the dominant cultural discourses which underpin and/or shape interpretation of art, with Amron's art largely positioned within Malay and/or Malay-Islamic socio-political contexts, and Suryodarmo's articulated as the bold experience of an Indonesian woman artist negotiating her cultural displacement between Indonesia and Europe and, as I argue, reflecting on her identity within a larger current of introspection by Indonesian artists in the post-Suharto era. Moreover, I explore the spiritual, metaphysical and existential aspects which imbue each artist's practice, each taking the body as an entry point or medium for the transcendence of the physical self. Importantly, different notions of temporality that are part of the artistic process and which assist in coming to terms with what it means to be human are central to both artists' practice. Finally, is the notion of discomfort that each investigate and express through their body-focused art: in both artists' works is the intent to investigate the struggle of being in the world, the physical and psychological endurance of negotiating and coming to terms with the self and subjectivity. Inherent to all this is the tension between the inner and outer body, and between the physical, ideological and metaphysical self. As I will argue, this discomfort is negotiated within each artist's practice as a means of transformation of the self. Significantly, for both, the ultimate objective of self-transformation is contingent on each artist's intimate familiarity with the contours and limits of the physical body as the subject and medium of their art-making, highlighting the importance of affective and sensory connection. It is through the discomforting effect of pushing the body's limits and art's limits that each artist manifests a “poetics of overcoming”¹⁰ and, in so doing, ultimately finds forms of solace, meaning and comfort via art.

In considering these two artists' works, I attend to different art historical approaches and discourses which shape our understanding of them. Notably, modern and contemporary art histories of Southeast Asia have often been positioned within oscillating discourses of “culture”, on the one hand, and “aesthetics” on the other.¹¹ The fissure that lies between these two seemingly disparate approaches to art interpretation suggests a historical relationship of methodological tension and anxiety. In this article, I draw on this tension not only to highlight different aesthetic and cultural narratives which inform the artists' respective practices, but also to show how it is through

the very intersection of these approaches that we may better understand the affective potential of their artworks. What is revealed in responses to contemporary Southeast Asian art that are not over-determined by cultural discourses or activist positions, but which are concurrently also boldly attentive to the pleasure and even displeasure of art's aesthetic and sensory possibilities and affective invitation? With reference to Amron's and Suryodarmo's art, foregrounding figurative and/or embodied engagement, I will explore the possibilities of art's "pleasure" in its multiple senses of beauty and awe, sensory connection, affective response and compelling aesthetics. In so doing, I will focus on the corporeal, both as artistic method and subject matter as much as the vehicle for transformative affective potential.

Amron Omar—*Duels with the Self: Pertarungan*

Born in 1957 in Alor Setar, Kedah in Malaysia, Amron Omar came to prominence in Malaysian art circles in the 1980s following his education at the Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) (now University Teknologi MARA, UiTM) from 1976–80, where lecturers trained in Western painting traditions taught Amron and his cohort at the Art and Design Faculty.¹² While the artist is well-known in Malaysia,¹³ where he is often commissioned to create portraits of local officials and notable individuals, his international profile is comparatively limited. Amron's art style is clearly inherited from the Western fine art tradition of figurative art but, as discussed below, is imbued with *bumiputera* (lit. sons of the soil) themes emphasising Malay ethnicity, which coincides with the *bumiputera*-focused cultural and economic policies introduced by the Malaysian government in the 1970s following the Sino-Malay communal riots of 1969.¹⁴ Within local art history, it may be positioned as a part of that lineage of regional portraiture developed by Hossein Enas and the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (Malaysia Painters Front) group, which Enas founded,¹⁵ a counterpoint to the landscape tradition as a genre for expressing local themes.¹⁶ Significantly, if Amron's art may seem conservative to foreign audiences this can be questioned against the Malaysian socio-cultural context, where he has developed a reputation as a "maverick" for persisting with his figurative art style.

Amron's art was first recognised by the establishment in 1982 when he won the National Art Gallery of Malaysia's prestigious Young Contemporary Artists Minor Award for his self-portrait or *Portret Diri* (1982) (also known as *Catan Diri*). It depicts the artist in his sarong, a lone figure, seated somewhat uneasily on his rattan chair. This kind of self-portrait is atypical across the artist's oeuvre, even if sharing a similar aerial perspective and restless

FIGURE 1: Amron Omar, *Catan Diri* (Self Portrait) (1982), oil on canvas.
Collection: Balai Seni Visual Negara (National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia)

energy to later works, for over the last 30 years Amron has been intensely preoccupied with depictions of *silat*—a genre of martial arts indigenous to Southeast Asia stemming from Malay cultural traditions. It is traditionally practised as self-defence between two male opponents but is also presented for ceremonial performances. There are many styles of *silat*, but *silat melayu* (“Malay silat”) has dominated portrayals of the martial art for many parts of Southeast Asia. Significantly, Amron’s interest in *silat* was sparked by his father’s role as a *silat* teacher, and he spent much of his childhood observing his father’s *silat* lessons at his family home. A practitioner of *silat* himself, Amron initially works from photographs of his own body in *silat* motion, developing these into drawings and paintings portraying the drama of *silat*.¹⁷

Pertarungan, variously translated as “the duel”, “struggle”, “competition”, “fight” or “battle” is the title of several of his *silat*-focused works;¹⁸ in 2012, the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia held Amron’s first retrospective exhibition under the same name. From his earliest depictions of *silat* in 1979, Amron’s paintings, drawings and sketches vary from realist depictions of the male human form in *silat* motion, to more abstracted representations of the figure. Moreover, the *silat* style Amron has conveyed has changed over this time from the more graceful flowing lines of *silat Minang* with its stylised dance movements of self-defence, to the more aggressive style of *silat Kuntau*

FIGURE 2: Amron Omar, *Pertarungan I* (1980), oil on canvas. Collection: Balai Seni Visual Negara (National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia)

defined by offensive strikes. This demonstrates the shifts in Amron's practice over the course of more than three decades, even as he has consistently focused on the same *silat* theme.¹⁹ While Amron's drawings and sketches are predominately charcoal expressions in tones of grey, black and white, his oil paintings are often vibrant, colour-filled canvases, which enliven the forms and textures of the male *silat* body.

Representations of the individual *silat* figure may be encountered throughout Amron's oeuvre; however, the spirit of the series is epitomised in the recurring drama of two figures duelling with each other. In his more realist representations of *silat* fighting, Amron makes still the otherwise dynamic, moving bodies of *silat*, offering a static moment to recognise the particular physicality of the *silat* practitioners, the often highly stylised gestures of *silat* such as its distinctive flexed-wrist positions and hand work, exaggerated low-squat, bent-leg stances, and the interlocking lines and forms created through the combative response and exchange of bodies. In his more abstract representations, Amron forsakes figurative realism to instead convey the movement and energy that is inherent to *silat*—through thickly painted contrasting

FIGURE 3: Amron Omar, *Pertarungan II* (1980), oil on canvas. Collection: Balai Seni Visual Negara (National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia)

colours (or two-tone contrasts of black and white) following the lines and muscular forms of the body, and through the play of shadows and “after-images” of the bodies as if having just moved from one position to another. Moreover, energy appears to circulate within each body as well as between bodies; the drama of the scene is heightened when the abstraction extends to the surrounding “negative” space of the canvas or paper surface, energy seeming to radiate from the exchange between the *silat* fighters. Significantly, the body position and style of blocking technique in *silat* is in relation to the opponent and is therefore a responsive gesture. This kind of responsive, relational energy seems to permeate Amron’s *silat* scenes, particularly when the dual figures are presented as almost mirror representations of each other.

Notably, the two figures represented in Amron’s *silat* works are not separate identities and rather a pairing of self-portraits, modelled on the artist. In effect, the duel is not between two individual opponents, but rather the polar spiritual characteristics of Amron’s inner self—a “double self-portrait—the self in conflict with the self”.²⁰ As unwavering subject matter for his art over three decades,²¹ Amron’s “obsession” with *silat* can be considered in two senses. On the one hand is the artist’s continuing refinement of his artistic skill requiring ongoing discipline and self-control, just as with mastering the art of *silat*. On the other hand is the artist’s ongoing existential struggle to come to terms with his inner self. For Amron, *silat* has served as a means for representing the inner struggle of “good and evil”. In particular, as art

collectors Pakhruddin and Fatimah Sulaiman suggest, they are about “the struggle against self” as defined by Islam—that is “*jihad* in its Islamic classical meaning and import”.²² Noting the absence of the *keris*,²³ they regard the works to be less about the practice of *silat* itself and more about the struggle with oneself in aspiring to become a better Muslim.²⁴ However, other art historical narratives bear influence on our present-day understanding of Amron’s art.

Two events in Malaysian history are often cited as crucial markers for contextualising Amron’s art: the National Cultural Congress of 1971 (*Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*) and the “Seminar on Indigenous Artistic Roots and its Current Development” (*Seminar Akar-Akar Kesenian Peribumi dan Perkembangan Kini*) held in 1979 at ITM, Shah Alam (where Amron was a student). Both stirred interest among local artists to develop a Malay-centred aesthetic, drawing from Islamic and traditional arts, for the development of a Malay/Islamic identity.²⁵ This manifested in the rise of abstract Islamic imagery marked by geometric patterns, Jawi script and other motifs. Nevertheless, as curator J. Anu explains, there were figurative artists, such as Amron, who persevered with their interest in depicting the human form:

The figure, during this time, although never quite extinguished, continued to take a back seat to ethnic-oriented abstraction. ... In retrospect, Amron was a maverick within the non-figurative context of the Malay/Islamic search of the 1980s. ... when the self-conscious Islamisation of Malaysian art was veering away from the figurative presence, Amron chose to use the figure to celebrate his Malay past.²⁶

Dominant art historical discourses suggest the waning of the figurative tradition during this time and Amron as quite singular in his pursuit of the figure. However, in what is arguably the most comprehensive art historical analysis of Amron’s art to date, Hasnul J. Saidon contends that the supposed decline of figuration as a direct result of Islamic revivalism is exaggerated and should be re-examined. Rather, based on his personal experience as a student at ITM (then UiTM) and primary data associated with this, Hasnul contends that the figurative tradition was hardly discouraged at ITM and was, rather, a regular feature of students’ fine art training. Tested in this way, the authority of the figurative versus non-figurative discourse as central to Malaysia’s racialised streams of modern art history is brought into question. Hasnul specifically cautions a more careful reading of the influential art histories developed by Redza Piyadasa in this regard: “What Piyadasa highlights as ‘a new notion of Malayness as the defining cultural paradigm’ and ‘the emergence of a

new Malay-dominated force within the Malaysian art scene' did not actually deter UiTM students from exploring the figurative genre or engaging with 'a broad-based multi-cultural heritage'.²⁷

Indeed, in 1980, Piyadasa positions Amron's *Silat* painting within the context of these earlier political developments in Malaysia in the latter half of the 1970s:

The currently popular attempts to project a Malay ethos may be related to a general search for 'roots' which has been propagated by various Malay academics, writers and some politicians. ... A significant number of Malay artists have responded to the new situation by projecting distinct Malay and Islamic influences in their works. ... Amron Omar's 'Silat' whilst employing the tenets of the Super Realist idiom illustrates rather dramatically an ancient Malay form of self-defence.²⁸

As with Hasnul's concerns to re-examine the influential art historical discourse developed by Piyadasa in positioning the work of Malay artists of this period, it is important to, here, note assumptions at play which have been preserved in ensuing Malaysian art history: Piyadasa does not distinguish here between the specific historical trajectories of Malay nationalism on the one hand and Islamic revivalism on the other, instead conflating the two as concurrent developments, and suggesting their inevitable relation in the artistic expressions of Malay artists. Therefore, in citing Amron's *Silat* in this context, there is a risk, also, of conflating Amron's Malay-focused art with Islamic revivalist tendencies. A nuanced account of art historical developments of this period must rather respond to the different political currents of Malay nationalism and Islamic revivalism, and local and international art trends in abstraction and figuration.

Writing in 1991, artist-curator Zakaria Ali regards Amron's *silat*-focused paintings as expressions of "the body and soul of the Malay personality".²⁹ Via the metaphor of *silat*, he argues dual traits of the Malay personality—concession on the one hand and a preparedness for violence on the other: "A Malay is gentle but when his honor is at stake or violated, the result is bloody."³⁰ However, Ali also emphasises the figurative aspect of Amron's work, his attention to the body and, in particular, the stylised movements of the body in executing *silat*:

Amron is ... fascinated with the human forms: bare bodied young men glittering with sweat performing the stylized movements of

the silat, the Malay art of self-defence.... It is this long training of watching the strained almost contorted muscles of the body and limbs in action that has provided Amron the subject very dear to his heart. His obsession is tested to the limits. The body endures hardships and abuses, sustains cuts and wounds.³¹

In both Ali's and J. Anu's analyses, while there is a socio-political framing of Amron's *Silat*, there is also due attention to the figurative aesthetic which dominates Amron's oeuvre. If *silat* is what connects Amron's art to Malay culture, then it is also dependent on the artist's aesthetic attention to the human figure in *silat* forms, compositions and motions. This aesthetic attention to the body, while such an obvious concern of the artist, is often sidelined in place of emphasising the artist's biographical and socio-cultural fit within the now hegemonic art historical discourses for this period.³² Curator Laura Fan emphasises this point in her own reflections on the contemporary body in Malaysian art, remarking, "Interestingly enough, despite the clear prominence of the figure in Amron's work, it has been identified as uniquely Malaysian because of his subject matter."³³

Significantly, J. Anu not only underlines Amron's figurative interest, but also connects Amron's formal techniques with his ability to evoke human emotion, spiritual and existential concerns:

Calling on a theatre of realist sobriety, [Amron] set his muscular forms and shapes in spectacular contrasts of light and shadow with an aim to evoking a range of human emotion between the players within the picture plane. ... he presented what he saw as the conflict between Man himself – between spiritual and physical values, good and bad, within and without.³⁴

In a later essay, Piyadasa links Amron's training at the ITM School of Art and Design in the late 1970s with the pro-Malay policy efforts of the government following the 1969 inter-ethnic riots and National Cultural Congress of 1971.³⁵ Piyadasa elaborates, this time situating Amron's art within a regional frame:

The initial phase had been marked by a conscious search for Malay 'roots' and a Malay essentialism or flavour. The artists initially returned to the Malay and Southeast Asian world and appropriated influences from both Malay and regional sources. Malay cultural forms are, as is well-known, connected to the overall history of

the region. Examples of this earlier Malay-centred commitment are evident in Amron Omar's *Silat* paintings....³⁶

With the eyes of a trained artist and the space to reflect in detail on Amron's painting *Bersilat 3*, Piyadasa here addresses the centrality of the body to Amron's art, and responds to the aesthetic and formal dimensions of Amron's painting *alongside* the political and ideological consequences of the new governmental policies following the Cultural Congress:

His realistic, representational renderings of his chosen themes have been enhanced by his accomplished handling of human anatomy.... The vertical composition of this particular work employs aerial perspective for its viewing effect. The viewer looks down at two crouching, bare-backed, muscular Malay youths who are involved in confronting each other with the highly stylised *silat* body movements.³⁷

A further contextualisation of Amron's art within "figurative" traditions is provided by Pradiipa P.H. Khor, who distinguishes between Islamic and Malay concerns in the context of the post-Cultural Congress government policies and the *pribumi* (indigenous) movement.³⁸ In her study "Malaysian Figurative Art from the 1950s to 1990s", Khor notes that "Although the constitution loosely defined Islam as part of the Malay identity, there were other aspects of Malay tradition that stemmed from local and indigenous customs ... hence, in the midst of the Islamic resurgence among the Malay community, there were artists insisting on the figurative tradition to express Malay traditions and customs that are not related to Islam".³⁹ Khor positions Amron's *Silat* as part of this group of artists, regarding his illustrations of the human figure as efforts to show that "Malay cultural identity can be defined through another cultural aspect of Malay tradition – the art of *Silat*".⁴⁰

As we have seen, the spiritual or existential themes underlying the *silat* series have been addressed to some extent in art historical writing. In Anu's analysis, this is expressed as "the conflict between Man [*sic*] himself – between spiritual and physical values, good and bad, within and without".⁴¹ Safrizal Shahir⁴² and Pakhruddin and Fatimah Sulaiman⁴³ situate Amron's art in the context of the Islamic struggle with the self, in order to liberate the soul "in the Way of God". Niranjan Rajah even encourages us to look beyond the figure, arguing that "Amron is deeply misunderstood". While recognising the importance of the figure to Amron's art, Rajah probes deeper, reflecting on what the (*silat*) figure motif means in a spiritual and metaphysical sense:

“Like the oil paints he uses, the figure is just his [Amron’s] chosen medium and his true subject is abstract – the containment and release of energy and spirit. ... The true subject, ... is not just the physical body but something of a much more spiritual or metaphysical orientation.”⁴⁴

For Hasnul, a friend and former student of Amron’s, this spiritual exploration of the self may even transcend Islamic principles so as to be considered in terms of universal themes of human experience:

The varied discourses I have with Amron and several close friends are more focused towards the quest to return to our primordial nature through art. For me, this subject is more universal, and it transcends the framework of “government policies” or “national cultural policies”. We know that Amron adopts the realist style derived from the Western modernist tradition to express the self-battle which is actually a very universal theme. The depiction of *silat* and his Malay-Muslim self-portraits merely acts as a medium of discourse.⁴⁵

Hasnul likens the subject matter of his conversations with Amron, regarding cultural, economic, political or judicial crises “as inner battles fought by mankind [*sic*] all over the world, and not just by the Malays”.⁴⁶

Hasnul also argues that the dominant art historical debates regarding Malay/Islamic ethnicity tend to overlook Amron’s lifelong interest in *silat* and his given family background and personal circumstances. While it may be the case that there was a conscious effort by some to encourage a Malay/Islamic identity through art, Hasnul suggests that in the case of Amron, the artist’s already established aesthetic interests and family ties to *silat* coincidentally corresponded with the new politics in regard to its depiction of the Malay indigenous self-defence art of *silat*. Thus, the art historical imposition of socio-political motivations may better reflect art historical impetuses and less the artist’s intentions.⁴⁷ In this sense, Hasnul asks, “Is it necessary that the essence of Islamic theology, the sense of Malayness, the familial and ancestral backgrounds, the *silat* and spiritual practices, and the regional (Kedah) milieu so long ingrained within Amron Omar’s psyche and personality be reduced to mere ‘politicised, ideological considerations’ or ‘new government policies’?”⁴⁸

A further discursive position offered by Hasnul is via the lens of post-colonialism, which he rightly remarks is not yet adequately developed for Amron’s art. Apropos of Amron’s turn to Malay ethnic themes, Hasnul suggests a repositioning of Amron’s art in terms of its “post-colonial reflex”.

FIGURE 4: Sulaiman Esa, *Waiting for Godot (Red)*, 1977. Photo etching on paper, 69 cm × 80 cm. Collection of NUS Museum, National University of Singapore

FIGURE 5: Sulaiman Esa, *Waiting for Godot I*, 1977. Photo etching on paper, 55 cm × 73 cm. Collection of National Art Gallery, Malaysia

Here he highlights the tendency to situate Amron's art within intra-national ethnic discourses, and rarely, if ever, to see it as potential commentary on the dominance of Western-centric themes in modern Malaysian art or the homogenising influences of a Western-centric brand of globalisation on traditional Malay culture: "... why attempts to rediscover traditional and ethnic (not Western) roots are not seen as part of the efforts to defy the domination of Western discourses in the history of Malaysian modern art? Why are they not interpreted as post-colonial reflexes as espoused by Edward Said and Syed Hussein Alatas?"⁴⁹ In this sense, both Khor and Hasnul encourage us to consider the focus on *silat* as a more complex postcolonial agency for late-20th century Malaysia—not only a reflection of Malaysia's multicultural fabric, but perhaps also a localised response to colonialist, Western-centric and globalising currents.

There is still much to explore regarding Amron's formal techniques; such analysis can reveal a deeper awareness of Amron's aesthetic intentions and their affective and transformative potential. Hasnul, for instance, analyses how the particular formal strategies Amron employs give rise to the "feelings" of duality and tension in his work.⁵⁰

By contrast, Rajah articulates the circulation of energy that is a feature of many of Amron's *silat* works, but which in *Pertarungan* (2002) is "pierced" and

“released”, just as the opponent must eventually be “pierced” with the *keris* weapon in *silat*: “the circulation is broken and physical, psychic and spiritual energies burst forth in explosive release”.⁵¹ Rajah here prompts us to consider Amron’s technical attention to compositional balance and dynamism, and how this is used to evoke both the controlled corporeal movements of *silat* and the circulation of energy which arises from the duel.

Pakhruddin⁵² and Safrizal⁵³ have noted the influence of renowned contemporary Malaysian artist Sulaiman Esa on Amron’s figurative practice. Significantly, Sulaiman was Amron’s teacher at ITM, part of the generation before him.⁵⁴ As is well-known, Sulaiman’s art practice took a dramatic turn in the 1980s, leaving behind Western-derived figurative expressions for Islamic-inspired abstraction and symbolism, having been torn between these two worlds. The inner conflict which has been observed for Sulaiman’s art by Sabapathy—of “dualities, tensions, and dichotomies”⁵⁵—resonates strongly with Amron’s art. This is apparent as early as Amron’s *Portret Diri*, in which the compositional structure of the self-portrait emphasises anxious dualities through the self-shadow and averted gaze.⁵⁶

These themes of inner conflict are also foregrounded as motivating forces in the performance art practice of Melati Suryodarmo to which I now turn. Like Amron, Suryodarmo’s art draws on conflict to reflect on the struggle of being human, but which ultimately is also the comforting impetus for renewal and transformation of the self.

Melati Suryodarmo: Finding a Home in Her Body

Q: Do you think artists have to search for their own spirituality?

A: I think spirituality is just one of the elements that an artist should search for. Artists also have to find out who they are and what their function is exactly.⁵⁷

Born in 1969 in Surakarta, Indonesia, Germany-based artist Melati Suryodarmo is a multidisciplinary contemporary artist, working across film, photography and installations. However, she has become best known for her long-duration performance art pieces which focus on the body—epic human actions requiring strength and endurance in meeting physical challenges. However, as I will argue here, Suryodarmo’s durational performance art pieces are ultimately also about the *personal* pursuit of a deeper spiritual or metaphysical consciousness of the self. As Suryodarmo puts it, “... a point where I can be, and switch the material body with this immaterial body”.⁵⁸ She has participated in numerous prestigious international performance art events and

exhibitions since 1996; however, her reputation in Indonesia has taken hold only more recently, especially through her own efforts to raise the profile of performance art in Indonesia.⁵⁹

Suryodarmo's performances are often feats of human endurance, testing her body's limits and potential over slow, repeated actions and processes, so as to explore her identity in connection to the world around her. In so doing, the ambiguous liminal space—between her inner and outer self, her body and her external environment—instead of posing mere conflict and discomfort (in Lacanian terms, “the abject”) becomes a productive resource for testing and knowing her physical, conceptual and psychic thresholds and, moreover, finding new possibilities for them. Deep physical connection to her body is something which Suryodarmo regards as absolutely vital to her performances, as much as their conceptual basis. She reflects: “I think as a performance artist, I need this kind of physical knowledge, not only the technique of presenting the body but also to learn about the character [of the body]. Although performance art for some is conceptual, I feel it needs the knowledge of body, in a space and time.”⁶⁰ At the same time, pleasure is expressed in Suryodarmo's art not only through the aesthetic appeal of Suryodarmo's movements, photographic staging and theatrical strategies, but also through elements of the absurd. Indeed, these are all means of drawing audiences “into” her work, compelling their attention into otherwise highly self-absorbed performance art pieces. It is perhaps this deeply personal aspect of Suryodarmo's performance art practice that has influenced the type of art historical engagement with her art, predominantly emphasising the artist's voice and biographical trajectory—her background and upbringing, intentions, experiences and reflections—through artist's statements and interviews.⁶¹

Suryodarmo's art is regularly positioned within an international lineage of performance art practice, with a strong connection to the performing arts traditions of dance and theatre. As much of the related art historical material details, Suryodarmo's style of performance art can be linked back to her training in Germany in the 1990s, first with celebrated master Butoh dancer and choreographer, the late Anzo Furukawa, who was trained in modern dance, ballet and Butoh, and became known for her cross-cultural and hybrid Butoh dance style incorporating absurdist and surrealist elements.⁶² Suryodarmo subsequently trained with the iconic performance artist Marina Abramović, renowned for her pioneering, fearless experiments in performance art since the 1980s, focusing on “confronting pain, blood, the mental and physical limits of the body”,⁶³ especially in response to observers of her performances.

FIGURE 6: Melati Suryodarmo, *Black Ball*, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, 2005. Photograph by Oliver Blomeier

Moving from Indonesia to Braunschweig, Germany in 1994, Suryodarmo intended to build on her degree in international relations from Universitas Padjadjaran in Bandung with no plans to pursue a career as an artist. However, through a chance encounter with Furukawa, Suryodarmo was invited to enrol in Furukawa's classes as part of the performance art programme at Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HBK). Drawing from her interview with Suryodarmo, Sylvia Tsai relates Furukawa's influence: her lessons taught resilience and resistance, trademarks of Suryodarmo's performance art style. Suryodarmo's attention to the techniques of theatre are also connected to Furukawa: "Classes... followed a gruelling schedule, starting at half past seven in the morning. Furukawa was a tough mentor who taught Suryodarmo how to create and organize stage productions, including choreography and costume making."⁶⁴

Suryodarmo then became a student of Abramović, later also becoming her assistant. Abramović's influence is especially notable in Suryodarmo's adoption

of long-durational solo works which challenge the stamina of the body and mind, encouraging awareness of the physical, psychological and emotional potential of the body and self.⁶⁵ With its inclusion of some of Suryodarmo's earliest performance art works, Abramović's documentation of her students' works for the publication *Student Body* situates Suryodarmo's art as a legacy of Abramović's performance art method.⁶⁶ Conversely, biographical texts and Suryodarmo's artist's statements also regularly reference this lineage, providing a key discursive lens for art historical and curatorial engagement with Suryodarmo's art.⁶⁷

The Black Ball (2005)⁶⁸ exemplifies many of Suryodarmo's performance art interests. First created for the Egon Schiele retrospective at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, *The Black Ball* is premised on a minimalist set of actions and, at first, reads as a relatively uncomplicated performance art script: the performance involves Suryodarmo sitting on a chair while holding a black ball. However, this chair was elevated two and a half metres from the floor and fixed to the museum wall and, during her first performance, Suryodarmo sat on it for eight to ten hours every day for four days, as audiences looked on. Beneath the chair, a horizontal shelf covered with artificial grass was set at a distance from the chair legs, reinforcing the artist's "floating" state.⁶⁹ Framed by a simple rectilinear black line, the spotlighted white wall behind Suryodarmo served as a canvas for her performance, the effect of the light painting shadows behind her. In conceiving the performance, Suryodarmo drew direct inspiration from one of Schiele's drawings, *Organic Movement of a Chair and Jug* (1912). While Schiele is best known for his expressionist figurative paintings, particularly his naked self-portraits and female nudes, Suryodarmo was interested in exploring the floating aspect of Schiele's chair and jug study. As she observes, "floating in a very specific perspective, as if both were thrown away in the air".⁷⁰ Describing her *Black Ball* performances, she reflects:

I am returning into silent of act [*sic*], returning my verve into the silence, compiling silent moments I have ever experienced in my life, especially those when I was in fear or loss. I approach the closest path, the most sensitive line, between my body and the undiscovered landscape of my psychological experiences. I am listening to my silence, focusing on its darkness.⁷¹

This meditative performance gesture of "listening to her silence" resonates with the transformative experience of silence that Schiele is argued to have

undergone at the time he created his drawing, while serving a prison sentence, with his portraits from this time taking on a more realist style and empathic approach to his subjects.⁷² In her “detached” silence, Suryodarmo confronts the darker moments of her psyche and life, symbolised by the black ball. At the level of performance aesthetics, Suryodarmo plays on the duality of being “a painter and be[ing] the painting at the same time”.⁷³ Understood within the context of her performance art training, Suryodarmo’s actions in *Black Ball* indeed reflect the kind of focused attention to breathing, mindfulness and slowness that are characteristics of Abramović’s long-duration method.

Beyond the influence of Furukawa and Abramović, the time-based aspect of Suryodarmo’s performance art and the kinds of body endurance or resistance techniques that are inherent to this are also a means of tapping into her body’s affective connection to the world as explained by *rasa*—the Javanese Hindu-derived concept, common throughout much of South and Southeast Asia, which describes the aesthetic essence or feeling of a work of art, encompassing at once sensory, cognitive, emotional and spiritual affects.⁷⁴ As Suryodarmo remarks in discussion with Malaysian art curator Adeline Ooi, “The slowness not only represents slowness itself but the precious depth of the feeling or *rasa*.”⁷⁵ In this sense, the aesthetic or formal aspect of Suryodarmo’s performance art medium—the slowed physical connection with the materiality and thresholds of her performing body—allows a platform for enlivening affective forms of connection with the world, or in other words, *feeling* the world. Indonesian curator Hendro Wiyanto also relates the significance of *rasa* in coming to terms with Suryodarmo’s art and her own interest in critically examining Javanese culture. Intrigued by Suryodarmo’s statement—“my body is (still) Javanese”—Wiyanto offers an explanation of the Javanese subject as a person who understands their reality beyond human cognition, and more in line with “feeling” or “taste”.⁷⁶

In anthropological historian Paul Stange’s analysis of *rasa* in Javanese culture, Stange examines the mystical movement and practice of *sumarah* in order to “draw attention to the ‘rules of *rasa*’ or ‘logic of intuition’ as they apply within meditation practice and group interaction” within *sumarah* practice.⁷⁷ Stange explains, “The Javanese word ‘*sumarah*’ simply means ‘the state of total surrender’, and it is a name not only for the organization, but also for the practice which provides its focus.”⁷⁸ It is unsurprising to learn that Suryodarmo herself is a former student of the *sumarah* tradition of Javanese meditation, encouraged by her parents from a young age. The embodied process of “meditative surrendering” that is characteristic of her style of performance art indeed resonates with the *sumarah* tradition in which the

body, mind and feelings must attune deeply to the senses and learn relaxation and acceptance to harness spiritual energy.

Yet there are other cross-cultural influences for the convergence of aesthetic, conceptual, spiritual and emotional engagements via the body witnessed in Suryodarmo's art and the fearless "surrendering" she undergoes in executing them. Alongside Suryodarmo's performance art training is the influence of her family, and the creative environment in which she was raised in Indonesia, surrounded by artists and dancers in her local community of Surakarta. Suryodarmo recalls, "I watched my father dance until I was a teenager. Our backyard was always packed with people dancing, playing music, and singing Javanese poetry. I've been influenced by this environment."⁷⁹ Indeed, both Suryodarmo's parents were trained in traditional Javanese dance, and Suryodarmo's father, Suprpto (or "Prapto") Suryodarmo, became an important figure in "posttraditional Javanese performance",⁸⁰ especially known for his experimental choreography for *Wayang Buddha*—a theatrical piece "hybridizing [Indonesian] shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*) and free-form dance, with a score combining Buddhist chant and gamelan music composed by Rahayu Supanggah, staged at national and international arts festivals in the 1970s".⁸¹ Prapto is also the famed Javanese teacher of "Amerta Movement", a free-form, meditative bodily movement practice he developed, inspired by Vipassanā—a hybrid of Javanese Sumarah meditation and Javanese Theravada Buddhism—emphasising the body's changing movements in its environment, and the notion of life perceived from a position of constant flux rather than a continuum of stasis interrupted by periodic movement.⁸² While Suryodarmo has herself commented on her father being an important influence on her work⁸³ and the site of her father's Amerta movement workshops—*Padepokan Lemah Putih* in Surakarta—as the location for Suryodarmo's annual performance art festival Undisclosed Territory, analysis of Suryodarmo's art does not often connect deeply with her family background and father's artistic career. As with Melati, Prapto Suryodarmo's artistic interests move between explorations in very localised Javanese influences in dance, martial arts (including *silat*), music, fine art, theatre and spirituality (Javanese mysticism), and experimentation with foreign elements, including Prapto's own artistic transformations in Germany in the early 1980s which led to the development of his Amerta free movement practice.⁸⁴ Moreover, the multidisciplinary arts environment in which Suryodarmo was raised in Indonesia corresponds with the hybrid art forms Suryodarmo employs in her performance art practice; however, this also has yet to be analysed in depth. Ooi and Bianpoen et al. provide unique glimpses into this in their separate biographical synopses of Suryodarmo:

Born into a family of artists in 1969, Melati Suryodarmo studied Javanese dance at the tender age of eight with dance maestro, Mr. Ngaliiman, from Solo, Indonesia. Around the same time, she enrolled with Mr. Soenarso, where she learnt combined Tai Chi movement with Javanese gamelan. 'I grew up in an absolutely unconventional and chaotic artist family ... as my parents were busy with their own study, they would send me to different activities and classes to occupy my time. My parents also sent me to learn Sumarah meditation (a form of Javanese meditation). Although I was too young to attend the meditation sessions, it was the best place I could go to find psychological solace during the difficult years when my mother was ill and later passed away,' she recalls.⁸⁵

Her father was a self-taught dancer who tried to find his own style, studying different styles of movement and blending elements of the martial arts and Javanese and Buddhist mediation with traditional dance. Her mother was a traditional dancer and Melati learned to dance the way her mother did, while absorbing her father's unique way of moving. While living at home, she practiced several forms of meditation, from the traditional Javanese method through to Buddhist meditation, as well as *sumarah*, a Javanese relaxation practice based on developing sensitivity and acceptance through deep relaxation of body, feeling and mind.⁸⁶

The dual cultural contexts Suryodarmo inhabits, of Germany and Indonesia, are often the basis for understanding her performances, with analysis of her art regularly exploring themes of social and cultural displacement. "Although [I] am not living in my home country, my home is where I am, I feel at home here and there. Or, I could feel I am not at home, even when I am at home. The home is the center, inside myself. Home is when I am in my center."⁸⁷ Wiyanto reflects, "After spending nearly half her life in another country – Germany – Melati Suryodarmo, the Javanese subject, is proud to name her motherland as Solo, centre of Javanese culture and often associated with the classical arts."⁸⁸ Similarly, Ooi observes that Suryodarmo's art "reflects the dual world she occupies, Indonesia and Germany, combining the vastly contrasting qualities from her binary contexts and training".⁸⁹ Suryodarmo herself also clearly cites this as a key motivation: "Crossing the boundaries of cultural and political encounters has been a challenge that stimulates me

discovering new identification. An effort to find identity is yet a dangerous act of losing the ground of origin.”⁹⁰ “I learnt to develop my personal process, especially to adapt to another culture. It helps a lot to see, accept and learn to be myself, to understand how my cultural roots will continue to influence my life and how history will always play a role in my present.”⁹¹

Suryodarmo is also counted among the widening group of contemporary women artists who embrace feminist themes in their artwork. This is yet another art historical lens onto Suryodarmo’s art, framed in the light of particular concerns of Indonesian women artists and the history of feminist art practices in Indonesia—including Bianpoen et al.’s collection on *Indonesian Women Artists* (2007) and Wulan Dirgantoro’s study titled “Defining Experiences: Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia” (2014)⁹²—thus positioning specific Indonesian feminist concerns within global feminist art histories or histories of women artists.⁹³ Indeed, there is a feminist-inspired foregrounding of the materiality and form of the body across Suryodarmo’s performances, particularly via representation and deconstruction of the *female* and *feminised* body, challenging conventional images and societal expectations regarding women.

In her performance *The Promise*, first carried out in 2002, Suryodarmo continues to flesh out the cross-cultural tensions which have come to define her life experience between Indonesia and Germany and, in particular, conflicting images of women and the feminine. Reflecting on this performance, Mino observes Suryodarmo’s appropriation of the maternal figure and pose popularised in the Christian iconography of the Madonna and Child, but also the rupture of this European iconography by inclusion of unexpected “abject” elements associated with Indonesian culture. In her performance, Suryodarmo’s body is draped in a vivid red cloth and she wears an exaggeratedly long 11-metre trail of thick hair.⁹⁴ Her body assumes the maternal pose of the Madonna, but in Suryodarmo’s case she lovingly caresses a mass of bloody raw livers. Suryodarmo here draws from idealised images of women in European Renaissance sculpture and paintings as well as Javanese cultural attitudes to expression of identity and the self, and the image of Durga, a female figure from the Mahabharata epic. The liver, in Javanese custom, signifies introversion as the organ which serves as a container for all that is not openly expressed to others (*makan ati*: “eat your own liver” or “swallow your own pain”) while hair is suggestive of beauty, sensuality and seduction. The absurdity of the artist’s staging of these contrasting elements—the monstrous and the feminine, evil and elegance—in turn suggests the irrationality of societal expectations, especially regarding women and the silent burdens they often bear in living up to others’ expectations. Recalling the

FIGURE 7: Melati Suryodarmo, *The Promise*, TransArt, Brixen, 2002. Photograph by Oliver Blomeier

feminist work of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed,⁹⁵ the discomfort and anxiety of the female grotesque and abject is here turned to critical comfort through the artist's conscious embrace of this absurdity—symbolic of the artist's own process of coming to terms with her transformation as a woman of cross-cultural experience.

Of course, the theme of exploration of self has recurred throughout Indonesian art history, and in the modern era corresponds with the birth of the Indonesian nation and a new postcolonial national identity. Modern art practices of “figuring” the self regularly depict the body as a focal site for the articulation and deconstruction of self-identity. While the body in performance is a familiar concept in Indonesia, employed in Indonesian traditions of dance, physical theatre and other performance arts, its use in contemporary avant-garde art practices is a more recent phenomenon. Significant avant-garde performance art pieces may be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s in Indonesia: artists including Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto, FX Harsono, Iwan Wijono, Tisna Sanjaya, Moelyono, Mella Jaarsma (originally from the Netherlands), Marintan Sirait and Arahmaiani all carried out performance art pieces in this period. The immediacy of the performance art medium as a live event, and its affinity to Indonesia's performance art traditions, was especially useful in communicating social issues to mainstream Indonesian

FIGURE 8: Melati Suryodarmo, *Alé Lino*, Germany, 2008. Photograph by Reinhard Lutz

audiences. Aside from in the work of Sirait,⁹⁶ much of this art was driven by sociopolitical issues, and sought to critique oppressions and injustices suffered under the Suharto regime (1965–98).

By contrast, Suryodarmo has fostered her performance art practice in Indonesia's *post-reformasi* (post-reformation) era, following the toppling of the Suharto regime, and from a generative position of critical cultural distance. As with the work of many other Indonesian artists in the post-Suharto era, I would argue that Suryodarmo's performance art, while informed by the environment around her, is less directly concerned with sociopolitical critique per se. Rather, her art may be positioned as part of a broader generational shift marked by deeper self-introspection on the part of contemporary Indonesian artists, which takes personal histories and experiences as the starting point for their art. At the same time, in Suryodarmo's performances, attention to the body is emphasised not only as a container of the self and site of discursive significations, but also as an integral aesthetic medium and form.

This emphasis on the aesthetic significance of the body also marks a shift in understanding contemporary Indonesian art. Writing in 1995, Indonesian art historian Jim Supangkat observed an over-emphasis on socio-political themes in the analysis of modern and contemporary Indonesian and South-east Asian art, "trapped in elaborating otherness".⁹⁷ That Suryodarmo's art is

acknowledged within an aesthetic legacy of performance art which privileges the body as artistic medium presents a turning point in the developing contemporary art history for Indonesia. Moreover, as Wiyanto observes, Suryodarmo herself is interested in exploring the burden of culture—she asks: “... what bearing [do] social and cultural discourses have on individual experience ... how much [do] any of us share with each other?”⁹⁸ Suryodarmo here indicates the constant tension she negotiates between her personal identity and the burden of representing larger sociocultural groups and their histories. As Wiyanto concludes with regard to Javanese culture, “The ‘Javanese body’ has given Melati depth of intuition (*rasa*), but she does not want to be burdened by history.”⁹⁹

In her three-hour long performance *Alé Lino* (2003), Suryodarmo addresses the physicality of her body by tapping into a range of meditative techniques from a variety of cultural sources, including her training in Butoh dance and long-durational performances. Principally, however, Suryodarmo was motivated to explore the relationship of performance art to her own Indonesian cultural origins. Akin to an ethnographer,¹⁰⁰ Suryodarmo undertook field research in South Sulawesi around the Pangkep and Bone regions. She investigated how Bissu communities, which form part of the Indonesian Bugis ethnic group, achieve states of altered consciousness or “emptiness”. Anthropologist Sharyn Graham Davies describes Bissu as “androgynous shamans”—transgendered individuals uniquely embodying a powerful combination of both male and female elements, who, as a result, are considered part deities and able to act as mediums with the spiritual world.¹⁰¹ In Bugis language *Alé Lino* refers to “the ‘middle world’ inhabited by humans, in between the ‘upper world’ of the heavens and the ‘lower world’ that lies beneath the surface of the earth”.¹⁰² In her performance, Suryodarmo is interested in exploring this spiritual and sacred aspect of being Bissu, and the rituals associated with “becoming” Bissu.¹⁰³ She stands on a high pedestal, leaning on a 4-metre-long pole which pushes discomfortingly and painfully into her solar plexus (celiac plexus), a simultaneously powerful yet vulnerable point in the body, often targeted in martial arts practice. While this site is the control centre for other nerves in the body it is also vulnerable in that if dealt a blow it can lead to instant death. Moreover, as Ooi offers in her cross-cultural reading of this artwork, “For the Chinese, the solar plexus is the ultimate forbidden point in acupuncture as it can cause immediate heart seizure, while the Hindus believe it is the chakra, ‘the center of etheric-psychic intuition: a vague or non-specific, sensual sense of knowing; a vague sense of size, shape and intent of being’”.¹⁰⁴ Combining resistance techniques from her training in Javanese dance and the Butoh method, Suryodarmo must “restrain

FIGURE 9: Melati Suryodarmo pictured with Bissu community from Bone, 2003

FIGURE 10: Melati Suryodarmo pictured with Powang Matowa Haji Saidi

and control the body as a miscalculated move”.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the entire performance, Suryodarmo focuses on the act of breathing in order to overcome the body (and its discomfort) and reach a state of complete emptiness, evoking the Bissu transcendent state in contacting the spiritual world. The pole her body presses against and the plinth she stands on symbolically stem from the material, earthly world of human habitation, reaching up to an ethereal world both connected to and beyond the physicality of her body.

Suryodarmo’s performance also calls to mind the Bissu self-stabbing ritual known as *ma’giri*, in which Bissu prove they are possessed by spirits (*dewata*) and therefore ready to carry out spiritual blessings by forcing swords (*keris*) into various parts of their body. As Davies explains in observing Bissu rituals, this includes, “... eyes, necks, temples, stomachs, and palms. If bissu were possessed by potent *dewata*, the *keris* would not penetrate their skin.”¹⁰⁶ With its exploration of Bissu rituals, Suryodarmo’s performance also registers the already syncretic nature of Suryodarmo’s Indonesian cultural experience between Java, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam and, more generally, the multiple aspects of identity she regularly negotiates within Indonesian culture itself. The resurgence of Bissu subjectivity in post-Suharto Indonesia is interesting in this regard: during Suharto’s New Order, state-driven initiatives to homogenise Indonesia’s diverse cultures saw Bissu become an increasingly marginalised group, and not compatible with state-defined Islam.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, in post-Suharto Indonesia, Bissu are again acknowledged as a valued part of Bugis traditional culture (*adat*) and able to coexist and meld with the Islamic faith.¹⁰⁸

Reflecting on the generative aspect of being physically distant from Indonesia, Suryodarmo has said, “When I’m geographically separated from my traditional environment there is a kind of longing to see again what is

FIGURE 11: Melati Suryodarmo, *Exergie – Butter Dance*, VideoBrasil, Sao Paolo, 2005.
Photograph by Isabell Matthaeus

behind performances of ritual I've witnessed. I don't feel directly influenced by those ritual performances, although I question the myths and thought processes which somehow lead to the formation of those kinds of rituals. And I ask again, why is my body unaware but seemingly obliged to be burdened by the history of my ancestors?"¹⁰⁹ In this respect, Suryodarmo's *Alé Lino* performance at once both aligns with and also differentiates itself from Bissu rituals, investigating Bissu rituals as cultural inheritance and at the same time re-signifying their import for Suryodarmo's aesthetic rituals in contemporary performance art.

A further framework for engaging with the body's aesthetic potential in Suryodarmo's art is dance. Suryodarmo expressly cites her "physical training in dance ... [as] an important vocabulary for her works"¹¹⁰ and her most renowned performance art work, *Exergie – Butter Dance* (first presented in 2000 at the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin), invokes dance traditions. For this mesmerising 20-minute-long performance piece, the artist is dressed in a tight black dress and shiny red heels. She treads a layer of butter blocks as gracefully as possible, dancing sensually to the percussive rhythms of traditional Makassan music. However, her performance is doomed to failure from the outset, as she repeatedly slips and falls on the gradually softening, buttery floor-surface. Nevertheless, with each fall she gets up, resumes her dancing

and then, at any moment, falls again in a seemingly senseless repetition, the performance taking on absurdist, even comical characteristics for its ostensibly irrational and futile actions. Persevering to maintain the elegant and flowing lines of her chosen dance, she struggles against her stocky body frame, her restricting attire, impractical footwear and, of course, a greasy floor. However, this absurd act turns to tragedy as the artist's repeated falls eventually register empathy for the physical pain she must be enduring. As Suryodarmo attempts to carry out her dance movements to the degree of perfection they require, her audience observes her struggle and becomes attentive to (even "senses") her pain, with the performance offering a potentially deeply moving experience for both artist and audience. The absurdity of the situation reflects the real-life farcicalities of cultural conformity, especially those pertaining to stereotyped images of women and the idealisation of their bodies not only in Indonesia but also elsewhere. Her iconic red heels and little black dress signify the sexualised female body, and here suggest the often physically impractical and impossible societal expectations imposed on women. The artist yet again cites her cultural dislocation upon moving from Indonesia to Germany as inspiration for the work and, at a very simple level, her newly acquired "love-hate" relationship with butter—something that is largely foreign to the Indonesian diet and to which she partly attributes her health problems since living in Germany.

Suryodarmo's investigation into the body's relationship to time is also significant in readings of *Exergie – Butter Dance*—biological, psychological and physical time and, in particular, the concept of the "moment". There is the inevitable and yet indefinite moment before the artist slips and falls again, where consciousness controls the artist's awareness of her body yet she is, all the while, vulnerable to the unpredictability of the actual moment of the fall. Suryodarmo is also interested in the moment after the fall and before rising again, where her will to get up again is tested by the experience of physical pain. This is as much a personal exercise as it is curiosity about other people's perception of her pain. The performance continues until the artist is drained of energy, after which she takes off her red shoes, stands up and leaves the space.

Suryodarmo regards *Exergie – Butter Dance* as "a short kind of 'haiku,' a poetic action, with only three kinds of basic movements: dancing on the butter, standing up. The fall is something in between that happens when it happens."¹¹¹ There is a sense of understanding the body's will and control to maintain order and stability, but at the same time to submit to what is uncontrollable—the inevitability of melting butter, the unavoidable effect of time and the environment on the natural course of things. Suryodarmo

likens this to critical moments in life which are turning points “when those moments of shifting happens ... a very special moment ... where decision and our resistance are required. Things are changing, nothing remains.”¹¹² This interest to investigate “the moment” within similar repeating patterns on the one hand, and as part of inevitable cycles of change on the other, is a recurring theme of Suryodarmo’s performance art practice, and corresponds with key Buddhist principles and the artist’s own life-practices of Buddhism.

Throughout Suryodarmo’s oeuvre, her shelter and home is negotiated in the form of her own body.¹¹³ Moving between cultures, and the past and the present, her body is not only a container embodying her personal memories, but also an experimental channel for uncovering new possibilities of self. As we have seen, Suryodarmo’s own voice is resonant in relating these personal experiences. Nevertheless, if performance art for Suryodarmo is premised, in the first instance, on her personal experiences, it is also a public enactment, connecting artist and audience and opening plural possibilities of meaning. Suryodarmo explains, “In performance art, the message to be conveyed by the artist is very personal, not always the same as that grasped by the audience ... Everybody will automatically be involved in the show, thinking and imagining as well as participating. That’s the special feature and challenge in presenting performance art.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, as Meskimmon has argued in theorising the cosmopolitan imagination for contemporary art, there is a particular affective dimension to contemporary art practices, not limited by the artist’s personal, geographical or cultural horizons. Rather, the affective capacity of contemporary art permits empathetic and sensory connections between people across cultural, linguistic and social borders to allow “a place in which we can imagine and respond to other people who are different from ourselves”.¹¹⁵ Suryodarmo’s art, I have argued, offers not a didactic expression, but rather an intimate personal exploration that permits a space for resonance with others and their experiences. This empathic relation between the self and other underlines Suryodarmo’s approach: “The most important thing I learned is the relation between human beings. It’s all about [being] human.”¹¹⁶ In this respect, it is interesting that one of the most public demonstrations of response to Suryodarmo’s art was offered in the realm of social media. An alternative reaction to *Exergie – Butter Dance* was popularised when an everyday YouTube user replaced the Makassan drum soundtrack of Suryodarmo’s original performance with the popular singer Adele’s hit *Someone Like You*, turning Suryodarmo’s performance into a comical film clip or, as one journalist described it, “the frankly hilarious combination of a woman falling on butter to the heartbreaking sound of Adele bidding a selfish lover goodbye”.¹¹⁷ The reworked video clip went “viral”,

attracting over 1 million views and 2,000 comments. It also bolstered views of the original video, which has now received more views than the remake. Suryodarmo's response to the reworked video clip acknowledges the multiple reactions and interpretations possible in response to her art.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed an alternative art historical approach for comparative explorations of Southeast Asian art, focusing on the art of Amron Omar from Malaysia and Melati Suryodarmo from Indonesia. Furthermore, I have explored the notion of "poetic overcoming" as a conceptual lens for examining how each artist negotiates the discomfiting tension between the body and the self. To this end, I have drawn on a range of texts to position our understanding of the artists' works. In the case of Amron, a selection of art historical narratives focusing on the artist's cultural context, aesthetic interests and spiritual motivations have been examined; in the case of Suryodarmo, even where secondary texts have been examined, the artist's own voice is resonant in explaining artistic intentions, key to the interpretation of her art.

For both Amron and Suryodarmo, art provides a platform and process for a performative "poetics of overcoming" and renewal of the self. In both artists' practices, the body is a site of both pleasure and discomfort, a space for tracing continuing cultural traditions and histories, and for investigating the physical, ideological and spiritual limits of the self.

Importantly, if both artists explore the dualities, oppositions and tensions which define the contemporary human condition—how we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and to the physical, conceptual and spiritual environments we inhabit—they are also deeply concerned with the transformative potential that is made possible when such tensions no longer define the limits of being human, but serve as productive departure points for negotiating alternative understandings of the self. To this end, for both artists, the body in art is not a mere marker or reflection of cultural identity, but a deeply personal and generative space for negotiating conflicting subjectivities and realising alternative perspectives for being and belonging in the world.

Through the unlikely coupling of Amron's and Suryodarmo's art, I have sought to emphasise the generative potential of alternative art historical approaches and methods for thinking through and articulating regional currents for Southeast Asian art history and performance art studies. Specifically, the art historical methods I have adopted here—encompassing and traversing the borders of national, gendered and generational histories—

have permitted a view of other intra-regional coordinates and crossings not usually pursued in drawing relations for Southeast Asian art. There is inherent risk and discomfort in this approach, given that some comparisons may be more fruitful than others. But I have sought to show here, through contrasting Amron and Suryodarmo's art, that an openness to the field of possible comparisons is an important art historical basis for prompting alternative regional imaginaries for Southeast Asia's art histories.¹¹⁹

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- ¹ See Ahmad Mashadi, "Moments of Regionality: Negotiating Southeast Asia", in *Crossings: Philippine Works from the Singapore Art Museum* (exh. cat.) (Singapore: Ayala Foundation Philippines & National Heritage Board Singapore, 2004), pp. 24–37. See also Redza Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts", in *Pameran retrospektif pelukis-pelukis Nanyang* [The Nanyang Artists Retrospective Exhibition] cat. (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia, 1979), pp. 24–35; Ismail Zain, "Towards an Utopian Paradigm: A Matter of Contingencies and Displacement", in *First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics: Proceedings of Symposium held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, National Art Gallery, October 24–27 1989*, ed. Delia Paul & Sharifah Fatimah Zubir (Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN COCI, 1989), pp. 20–5; Niranjana Rajah, "Towards a Southeast Asian Paradigm: From Distinct National Modernisms to an Integrated Regional Arena for Art", in *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-East Asian Art*, ed. ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information & Singapore Art Museum (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2002), pp. 34–5; T.K. Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in South-East Asian Art Historiography", in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.) (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996), pp. 13–7; Patrick D. Flores and Joan Kee (eds.), "Special Issue: Contemporaneity and Art in Southeast Asia", *Third Text* 25, 4 (2011); Lee Weng Choy, "Position Paper on 'Comparative Contemporaries'", at Asia Art Archive *Comparative Contemporaries: A Web Anthology Project*, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Programme/Details/290> [accessed 10 Oct. 2012]; Michelle Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990* (Amsterdam and New York: Brill/Rodopi, 2015).
- ² Mashadi, "Moments of Regionality: Negotiating Southeast Asia", p. 25.
- ³ Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in South-East Asian Art Historiography".
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts".
- ⁶ On "generational cohorts" see John Clark, "The Worlding of the Asian Modern", in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), pp. 67–88.
- ⁷ See, for instance, T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).
- ⁸ For instance, the academic conference-exhibition project *Women Imaging Women* (1998–99). See Flaudette May V. Datuin and Patrick D. Flores (eds.), *Women Imaging Women: Home, Body, Memory, Papers from the Conference on Artists from Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam* (Manila: Art Studies Foundation/Ford Foundation/Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1999); and curator Binghui

Huangfu's *Text and Subtext* exhibition project, see Binghui Huangfu (ed.), *Text & Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Woman*, cat. (Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery, 2000).

- ⁹ Sabapathy, *Modernity and Beyond*.
- ¹⁰ Emanuela Nobile Mino, "Melati's Promising Challenges", in *Loneliness in the Boundaries: Melati Suryodarmo*, cat. (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art House, 2006), http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/about_text_Melatis_Promising_Challenges.html [accessed 11 Aug. 2015]. Mino uses this phrase in describing Suryodarmo's art practice in particular; however, as I argue in this article, this "poetic of overcoming" also resonates with Amron's practice.
- ¹¹ For a discussion on differentiated cultural and aesthetic approaches for art history, see, for example, Ismail Zain, "Seni dan Imajan: Suatu Pandangan Umum Terhadap Imajan dan Makna Kontekstuilnya" [Art and Image] in *Seni dan Imajan: Suatu Pandangan Umum Terhadap Imajan dan Makna Kontekstuilnya* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia, 1980), and see Krishen Jit's analysis of Ismail Zain's paper in Krishen Jit, "Seni dan Imajan [Art and Image]: The Appearance of a Coda", in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position, Selected Writings*, ed. Kathy Rowland (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003), pp. 224–30. Also see Krishen Jit, "Ismail Zain: A Protean Appearance in Malaysian Art", in *Ismail Zain Retrospective Exhibition, 1964–1991*, cat. (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), pp. 10–29; Joan Kee, "Trouble in New Utopia", *Positions: East Asia Cultural Critique* 12, 3 (Winter 2004), pp. 667–86; Joan Kee, "Guest Editor's Introduction: Twenty Questions", *Positions: East Asia Cultural Critique* 12, 3 (Winter 2004), pp. 559–610; Isabel Ching, "Tracing (Un)certain Legacies: Conceptualism in Singapore and the Philippines", *Asia Art Archive, Diaaologue: Perspectives* (July 2011), <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/1045> [accessed 26 Sept. 2012]; Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990*.
- ¹² Alongside Piyadasa who trained at Hornsey College of Art London (see n. 13), this includes the tutelage of Sulaiman Esa, also trained at Hornsey College of Art, and Choong Kam Kow, who, after obtaining a BA in Fine Art from the National Taiwan Normal University in 1961, went on to complete a master's degree in fine arts at Pratt Institute, New York in 1968. See Pakhruddin Sulaiman, "Amron Omar's *Pertarungan* Manoeuvres: A Shift from Dance to Duel", in *Pertarungan: Amron Omar*, cat. (Kuala Lumpur: National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia, 2012), p. 174 and Choong Kam Kow, "Bio-Data", <http://www.choongkamkow.com/index.php/profile/biodata.html> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹³ While many of Amron's works form part of private collections, the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia holds several of Amron's most accomplished paintings, including *Pertarungan I* (1980), *Pertarungan II* (1980) and *Bersilat 3* (or *Silat*) (1980).

Notable collectors of Amron's art include Pakhruddin and Fatimah Sulaiman; Datuk Hamzah Mohd Salleh and Datin Nurlin Abdullah; and the late art historian Redza Piyadasa. Hasnul J. Saidon mentions that Piyadasa was the first to collect Amron's works while Amron was still an art student at ITM; Piyadasa was also a teacher to Amron there; see Hasnul J. Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art (*Amron Omar dan Drama Pertarungan Dalam Wacana Seni Rupa Modern di Malaysia*)", in *Pertarungan*, p. 121.

- ¹⁴ On race and multiculturalism in Malaysia, and development of the National Cultural Policy in Malaysia, see Daniel P.S. Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden and Gaik Cheng Khoo (eds.), *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2009); and Kathy Rowland, "Culture and the Arts in Malaysia: Playing to Multiple Galleries", in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss (Abingdon, Oxon. and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 337–46.
- ¹⁵ Datuk Hossein Enas (1924–95), commonly regarded as "the father of Malaysian portrait painting", was born in Bogor, West Java and fled to Malaya in 1947 during Indonesia's revolutionary war against the Dutch.
- ¹⁶ With regard to the generation following Amron in Malaysia, there is a strong continuation of the figurative tradition to trace themes of identity by younger artists. Notably, the artist Raja Shariman has created works also inspired by *silat*; Shariman's *Gerak Tempur 19* (1995) and *The Duel* (1996) are sculptural installations constructed from scrap metal and machinery, mimicking the human form of *silat* warriors in action. The "F Klub" was established in 2009, bringing together diverse artists committed to figuration in their practice. See <http://www.thefklub.com/p/blog-page.html> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, I have drawn primarily from the collection of essays in the exhibition catalogue accompanying Amron's retrospective exhibition at the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia, in 2012: ed., *Pertarungan*. This book is arguably the most comprehensive set of essays on the artist's work to date, with essays authored by individuals familiar with Amron and his art; many of the essays are based on personal and professional experiences, conversations and interviews with the artist.
- ¹⁸ Safrizal Shahir's essay, "Journey of Quest for Spiritual Station of True Self or from Complete Human Figure to Painting of Self: A Biography [of] Amron Omar" [*Perjalanan Mencari Kepada Hakikat Diri Dari Manusia Penuh Ke Catan Diri: Biografi Amron Omar*] is perhaps the most comprehensive biographical essay to date about the artist. In National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia (ed.), *Pertarungan*, pp. 34–93.
- ¹⁹ Pakhruddin Sulaiman, "Amron Omar's *Pertarungan* Manoeuvres: A Shift from Dance to Duel", in *Pertarungan*, pp. 168–75; Abdul Rahman Mohd Yusri, "History

- of 'The Duel' – From the perspective of ARTI Gallery", in *Pertarungan*, pp. 182–6; Husin Mohd Iruadee, "'Pertarungan' Amron Omar", in *Pertarungan*, pp. 140–9.
- ²⁰ Niranjan Rajah, *Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa: Expression & Expressionism in Contemporary Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2002), p. 56.
- ²¹ Alizam Hasan's "Curator's Notes" records 1979 as the date for Amron's first work in his "Duelling" series, with the painting entitled *Silat* (1979). See Alizam Hasan, "Curator's Notes", in *Pertarungan*, pp. 26–33.
- ²² Pakhruddin Sulaiman and Fatimah, "The Past and The Present in 3 Selected Works by Amron Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail & Sharmiza Abu Hassan", in *Thirty Art Friends Appreciating Southeast Asian Art: A Project by Quek Tse Kwang* (Singapore: Quek Tse Kwang, 2010), p. 154; Pakhruddin Sulaiman and Fatimah, "Forum: The Collectors", Sharon Chin [*Arteri, SEARCH: Southeast Asian Art Resource Channel*], 9 July 2010, <http://arteri.search-art.asia/2010/07/09/forum-the-collectors/> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ²³ The *keris* or *kris* is a kind of asymmetrical dagger used in *silat*, both a weapon and spiritual object. Indigenous to Southeast Asia, variants of the weapon exist throughout the region.
- ²⁴ The 17th-century tale of the great Malay warrior Hang Tuah (*Hikayat Hang Tuah* [The Tale of Hang Tuah] may also bear relevance. The tale "record[s] the glory of the Sultanate of Melaka, and the exemplary life of its greatest warrior, Hang Tuah." Integral to the tale is a famous duel between Tuah and his friend, as well as Tuah's strengthening understanding of Islam and Sūfism. Of enduring popularity, the tale offers continuing ideological, cultural and religious resonance for the Malay population today. See Virginia Matheson Hooker, "Hang Tuah, Hikayat", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 83–6.
- ²⁵ One of Amron's earliest *silat* paintings, although unfinished at the time, was exhibited at the Indigenous Artistic Roots seminar, suggesting the artist's conscious participation in support of the Malay-focused *bumiputera* cultural turn; see Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", p. 31; and Shahir, "Journey of Quest For Spiritual Station of True Self or From Complete Human Figure to Painting of Self: A Biography of Amron Omar".
- ²⁶ J. Anu, "Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art", in *Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art*, cat. (Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas, 1996), p. 15.
- ²⁷ Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", p. 126. For this argument, see the section "Circling Outside the Glass: Discourse Outside Amron Omar's Battle Arena", pp. 124–7). See also Hasnul J. Saidon, "Under-deconstruction: Contemporary Art in Malaysia After 1990",

in *Susurmasa Timelines: Seni Lukis Malaysia Bersama 50 Tahun Balai Seni Lukis Negara = Malaysian Art with 50 Years National Art Gallery*, ed. Mohamed Najib Ahmad Dawa (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery Malaysia, 2008), pp. 241–6. Of course, figuration’s decline might also be explained by the international trends in abstraction and other forms of expression more popular at this time. Related to this, art historian Simon Soon points out that “upon close study, interests in Islamic expressions (as opposed to the resurgence of Malay cultural nationalism, which are two different but later overlapping concerns) really did not come together until the late eighties onwards and it is closely entwined with a kind of Islamic corporatism that former President Mahathir was slowly espousing” (Simon Soon, personal correspondence, Apr. 2016).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Zakaria Ali, “The Malaysianness of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity”, in *Kemalaysiaan Senilukis Malaysia: Soal Identiti* [The Malaysianness of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity] (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1991).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Notably, as early as 1982 artist-curator Syed Ahmad Jamal offered a reading of Amron’s *Catan Diri* (or *Portret Diri* [Self-portrait]) in terms of artistic school and style, writing that he “traces the continuity of academic naturalistic school with his superbly executed figurative paintings”. Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Seni Lukis Malaysia – 25 Tahun* [25 Years of Malaysian Art] (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1982).

³³ Laura Fan, “Imagining the Contemporary Body”, in *Imagining the Contemporary Body: Selected Works of Art from the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia*, ed. Valentine Willie (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 1996), p. 18.

³⁴ Anu, “Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art”, p. 15.

³⁵ The National Cultural Congress was convened by the then governing National Operations Council and held at the University of Malaya in 1971. The Congress sought to define the nation’s culture and identity following the May 13 inter-ethnic riots of 1969.

³⁶ Redza Piyadasa, “Modern Malaysian Art – An Introduction”, in *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2002), pp. 32–4.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

³⁸ For a comparative discussion on the discursive construction of the body in Malaysian art vis-à-vis the Malay-Islamic context see also Ahmad Izmer, “The Body in Modern Malaysian Art”, in *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysian Art (Volume 1)*, ed. Beverly Yong and Nur Hanim Khairuddin with T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2012), pp. 252–61.

- 39 Pradiipa P.H. Khor, "Malaysian Figurative Art from the 1950s to 1990s: The Politics of Cultural Identity", BA (Hons) thesis [Canberra: Department of Art History & Film Studies, Australian National University, 2003], p. 40.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Anu, "Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art", p. 15.
- 42 Shahir, "Journey of Quest for Spiritual Station of True Self or from Complete Human Figure to Painting of Self: A Biography of Amron Omar".
- 43 Pakhruddin Sulaiman and Fatimah, "The Past and The Present in 3 Selected Works by Amron Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail & Sharmiza Abu Hassan".
- 44 Rajah, *Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa: Expression & Expressionism in Contemporary Malaysian Art*, p. 56.
- 45 Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", p. 124.
- 46 Ibid., p. 131.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", p. 123.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", p. 135. See also Hasnul J. Saidon, "Ilmu Amron kukuh berpaksi" in *Berita Harian*, 13 Dec. 2000, p. 8.
- 51 Rajah, *Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa: Expression & Expressionism in Contemporary Malaysian Art*, p. 56.
- 52 Pakhruddin Sulaiman, "Amron Omar's Pertarungan Manoeuvres: A Shift from Dance to Duel", p. 174, n. 11.
- 53 Shahir, "Journey of Quest for Spiritual Station of True Self or from Complete Human Figure to Painting of Self", p. 82.
- 54 Ibid. Safrizal Shahir's biographical essay records Sulaiman Esa as one of Amron's lecturers at ITM.
- 55 T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does it?", in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), pp. 74–5.
- 56 Zakaria Ali, *50 Merdeka – A Celebration of Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia and Perdana Leadership Foundation, 2007), p. 31. A later, unfinished painting by Amron, *Di Bebuai Mimpiku Mentari Bersinar Terang* (1991) shown at the exhibition Not for Sale at White Box, MAP@Publika art space, Kuala Lumpur, from the collection of Pakhruddin and Fatimah Sulaiman, is also strongly suggestive of these dualities. With its top section depicting popular Western women models of the late 20th century and its bottom section showing a young Malay man asleep in his sarong, Pakhruddin interprets the painting

to be “a struggle against the omnipresence and the overpowering dominance of the West (its ideology and culture) over those of Muslims around the world” (see Pakhruddin Sulaiman, “Collector: Pakhruddin & Fatimah Sulaiman”, 12 Mar. 2013, at mapkl facebook, NOT FOR SALE art exhibition at MAP, 29 Mar. 2013, <https://m.facebook.com/mapkl/photos/a.10151365857391200.1073741828.364984511199/10151368189406200/> [accessed Apr. 2016].

- ⁵⁷ Melati Suryodarmo and Marina Abramović, “Questions and Answers: Marina Abramović and Students”, in *Marina Abramović: Student Body: Workshops, 1979–2003: Performances, 1993–2003*, ed. Marina Abramović (Milan: Charta Art Books, 2003), p. 35.
- ⁵⁸ Quoted in Johanna Householder, “Imagine that Every Woman is A Country”, in *Loneliness in the Boundaries*, cat. (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art House, 2006), http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/about_text_Imagine-that_Every_Woman_is_a_Country.html [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ⁵⁹ While living in Germany, Suryodarmo has helped raise the profile of performance art in Indonesia through her establishment of the Performance Art Laboratory Project: “a dialogue and creative experimentation forum” which has staged the annual performance art event Undisclosed Territory, held in Surakarta since 2007 at the interdisciplinary arts institution Padepokan Lemah Putih, which was founded by Suryodarmo’s father Suprpto Suryodarmo in 1986. For the Undisclosed Territory archive, see <http://www.lemahputih.com/undisclosedterritory.html> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ⁶⁰ Ooi, “Melati Suryodarmo’s Home is Inside Herself”.
- ⁶¹ The comparatively lesser emphasis on artists’ statements in the case of Amron in this article may be attributed to the artist’s limited interactions with the public art discourse concerning his art. As Hasnul observes, “Amron seldom attends exhibition openings, or art-related workshops, seminars, conferences, lectures, dialogues, discussions, meetings, and so on. I consider Amron a rather reclusive person (doing his own things).” See Saidon, “Amron Omar and the ‘Duel’ Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art”, p. 124.
- ⁶² For an analysis of Furukawa’s particular style of Butoh performance and choreography see Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metaphoric Dance and Global Alchemy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
- ⁶³ Cristina Demaria, “The Performative Body of Marina Abramovic”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 11, 3 (Aug. 2004): 295.
- ⁶⁴ Sylvia Tsai, “Profiles: Unspoken Language: Melati Suryodarmo”, *ArtAsiaPacific* 85 (Sept./Oct. 2013): 76–7.
- ⁶⁵ As a further cross-cultural tracing of this performance art lineage, interestingly, Marina Abramović has noted her admiration for the Taiwanese-American performance artist Tehching Hsieh, whom she considers an inspiration for

his pioneering durational performance art practices: “Tehching Hsieh. I think he is a master. When I think of my twelve-day pieces and his five, one-year performances—it is only something someone can do with Eastern fanaticism. It is incredible. He definitely deserves a better position in history.” See Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey, “In Conversation: Marina Abramović”, *Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics and Culture*, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2003/12/art/marina-abramovic> [accessed 23 Mar. 2016].

- ⁶⁶ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Student Body: Workshops, 1979–2003: Performances, 1993–2003*, ed. Marina Abramović (Milan: Charta Art Books, 2003).
- ⁶⁷ Of course, a range of motivations may be at play in reinforcing Suryodarmo’s training under Abramović, including the artist’s own sense of indebtedness to Abramović, referencing to Abramović’s renowned performance art method and the cosmopolitan star status attached to this, and commercial motivations. Conversely, through Suryodarmo’s own rising popularity in the contemporary art world, Abramović’s status is likewise reinforced; moreover, Abramović’s interest in cross-cultural approaches to understanding and engaging the body is arguably strengthened via her association with Suryodarmo as an artist of Indonesian/Asian cultural heritage.
- ⁶⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all dates provided are for the first performances of each artwork.
- ⁶⁹ The shelf was designed by Abramović.
- ⁷⁰ Melati Suryodarmo, *The Black Ball*, 2005, in “Works”, http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/The_Black_Ball.html [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² See Alessandra Comini, *Schiele in Prison* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).
- ⁷³ Suryodarmo in Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens* (Jakarta: Yayasan SeniRupa Indonesia, 2007), p. 200.
- ⁷⁴ For a cross-cultural, Anglophone overview of *rasa* with regards to performance in particular, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁷⁵ Suryodarmo in Adeline Ooi, “Melati Suryodarmo’s Home is Inside Herself”, *C-Arts*, 13 Feb. 2009. <http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/Melati-Suryodarmo--s-Home-is-Inside-Hers/069F3B8B477B1CFB> [accessed 11 Aug. 2015].
- ⁷⁶ Hendro Wiyanto, “Melati Suryodarmo”, in *Beyond the Self: Contemporary Portraiture from Asia*, ed. Christine Clark (Canberra: National Portrait Gallery, 2011), pp. 134–5 (also online at <http://www.portrait.gov.au/content/melati-suryodarmo/> [accessed Apr. 2016]).

- ⁷⁷ Paul Stange, "The Logic of *Rasa* in Java", *Indonesia* 38 (Oct. 1984): 115.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Suryodarmo in Ganug Nugroho Adi, "Melati Suryodarmo: The Power of the Body", *The Jakarta Post*, 24 May 2011, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/05/24/melati-suryodarmo-the-power-body.html> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ⁸⁰ Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Review: *Embodied Lives: Reflections on the Influence of Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*, ed. Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sanra Reeve (Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2014)", *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, 1 (Spring 2016): 233.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² *Amerta* is a Javanese word which Suprpto Suryodarmo translates as the "nectar" or "elixir" of life; see Sandra Reeve, *Nine Ways of Seeing a Body* (Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2011). On the Amerta Movement, see Katya Bloom, *The Embodied Self: Movement and Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2006); Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve (eds.), *Embodied Lives: Moving in the Garden of Amerta* (Axminster, Triarchy Press, 2014); Lise Lavelle, "Amerta Movement of Java 1986–1997: An Asian Movement Improvisation", PhD thesis (Lund: Lund University Centre for Languages and Literature, 2005); Sandra Reeve, "The Ecological Body", PhD thesis (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2009); Padepokan Lemah Putih, <http://www.lemahputih.com/Html/ABOUT/about1.html> [accessed 11 Aug. 2015].
- ⁸³ See, for instance, Ellen Mueller, "Chapter 1: Interviews: Melati Suryodarmo", in *Elements and Principles of 4D Art and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ⁸⁴ There are few academic sources relating Suprpto Suryodarmo's biography and artistic career. For a popular synopsis see Ganug Nugroho Adi, "Suprpto Suryodarmo: Meditation in Motion", *The Jakarta Post*, 22 Nov. 2010, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/11/22/suprpto-suryodarmo-meditation-motion.html#sthash.4YRjC7uP.dpuf> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ⁸⁵ Ooi, "Melati Suryodarmo's Home is Inside Herself".
- ⁸⁶ Bianpoen, Wardani and Dirgantara, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, p. 197.
- ⁸⁷ Ooi, "Melati Suryodarmo's Home is Inside Herself".
- ⁸⁸ Wiyanto, "Melati Suryodarmo", p. 134.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Melati Suryodarmo, artist's statement, 2008, in "Melati Suryodarmo: About", <http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/about.html> [accessed 11 Aug. 2015].
- ⁹¹ Ooi, "Melati Suryodarmo's Home is Inside Herself".
- ⁹² See Bianpoen, Wardani and Dirgantara, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*; Wulan Dirgantoro, "Defining Experience: Exploring Feminism in Indonesian Visual Arts", paper presented to the 17th Biennial Conference of the

Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, 1–3 July 2008, <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mai/files/2012/07/dirgantorowulan.pdf> [accessed Apr. 2016]; Wulan Dirgantoro, “Defining Experiences: Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia”, PhD thesis (Hobart: University of Tasmania, 2014); Householder, “Imagine that Every Woman is a Country”.

- ⁹³ On the positioning of Asian Women artists and Asian feminist themes within global contexts see also Huangfu, *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Woman* and Joan Kee, “What is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women’s Art?” in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (London and New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2007), pp. 106–21. Notably, Wiyanto’s analysis of Suryodarmo’s practice makes reference to Kee’s study of Asian feminist art, in order to “test its connections”: see Wiyanto, “Melati Suryodarmo”, p. 135.
- ⁹⁴ The motif of hair in relation to Javanese gender is also explored in the contemporary art practice of Nindityo Adipurnomo.
- ⁹⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) and Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- ⁹⁶ Interestingly, Sirait was born in Braunschweig, Germany and lives and works in Bandung, Indonesia; Suryodarmo was born in Surakarta, Indonesia and lives and works in Braunschweig. The two artists’ personal stories of cross-cultural experience across Indonesia and Germany have provided key stimulus for each artist’s respective performance art practice. In the case of Sirait, this is principally through her *Building a House* (since 1994) series of installations and performances, which, uncannily, like Suryodarmo, combines her dance and theatre training with Indonesian traditional spirituality, contemporary conceptual art and existential philosophy. Dirgantoro has noted that Sirait was “also a co-founder of a performance art group called *Sumber Waras* (“Source of Wellbeing” ... or “Source of Sanity”) which “explored movements and the body as sources of self-awareness; Arahmaiani was another active member of the group” (Dirgantoro, “Defining Experience: Exploring Feminism in Indonesian Visual Arts”, p. 9).
- ⁹⁷ Jim Supangkat, “Introduction: Contemporary Art of the South”, in *Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries: Unity in Diversity in International Art, Postevent Catalogue*, ed. Edi Sedyawati, A.D. Pirous, Jim Supangkat and T.K. Sabapathy, cat. (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, Project for Development of Cultural Media, Directorate General for Culture, Department of Education and Culture, 1997), pp. 20–31.
- ⁹⁸ Wiyanto, “Melati Suryodarmo”, p. 135.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁰ On the notion of the contemporary artist as ethnographer, see Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer”, in Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde*

at the End of the Century (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 171–204.

- ¹⁰¹ Sharyn Graham Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders among Bugis in Indonesia* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007). See also Sharyn Graham Davies, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); and Umar Umar, “Dancing with Spirits: Negotiating Bissu Subjectivity through Adat”, PhD thesis (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 2008).
- ¹⁰² “Melati Suryodarmo: *Alé Lino*”, in Singapore Art Museum, *Sensorium 360°: Contemporary Art and the Sensed World*, cat. “short guide” (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2014), https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/downloads/exhibitions/Sensorium_shortguide_140721.pdf [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹⁰³ Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms*, pp. 82–102.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ooi, “Melati Suryodarmo’s Home is Inside Herself”.
- ¹⁰⁶ Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms*, p. 96.
- ¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, as Davies observes, art historian of Indonesia Claire Holt remarked, in 1939, that *Bissu* would soon become mere performers, turning “from priests into clowns” (Holt, *Dance Quest in Celebes* [Paris: *Les Archives Internationales de la Danse*, 1939], p. 35. See Davies, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia*, p. 203.
- ¹⁰⁸ Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders Among Bugis in Indonesia*, p. 99.
- ¹⁰⁹ Wiyanto, “Melati Suryodarmo”, p. 135.
- ¹¹⁰ Ooi, “Melati Suryodarmo”.
- ¹¹¹ Amanda Betlehem, “Interview with Melati Suryodarmo”, 22 Sept. 2012, “Works: Performances: EXERGIE—Butter Dance”, at Melati Suryodarmo.com, http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/works_Exergie_Butter_Dance.html [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹¹² Betlehem, “Interview with Melati Suryodarmo”.
- ¹¹³ This concept of finding shelter or a home in the body, as an artist living and working across cultures, is also relevant to the installation and performance art practices of Dutch-born Indonesian artist Mella Jaarsma.
- ¹¹⁴ Ganug Nugroho Adi, “Melati Suryodarmo: The Power of the Body”, *The Jakarta Post*, 24 May 2011, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/05/24/melati-suryodarmo-the-power-body.html> [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹¹⁵ Marsha Meskimmon, “Response and Responsibility: On the Cosmo-politics of Generosity in Contemporary Asian Art”, in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), p. 147; Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

- ¹¹⁶ Melati Suryodarmo, "Melati Suryodarmo: A Video Profile of Indonesian Contemporary Artist", www.IndoArtNow.com, 14 Feb. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs_WsRQC5iI [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹¹⁷ See Mallika Rao, "Meet The Marina Abramovic Protégé Who Went Viral for Dancing in Butter", *The Huffington Post*, 17 June 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/au/2014/06/17/melati-suryodarmo-butter-dance_n_5491962.html?ir=Australia [accessed Apr. 2016]; Rachel Will, "Indonesia's Maverick Performance Artist", *New York Times* (International Arts), 12 June 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/13/arts/international/indonesias-maverick-performance-artist.html?_r=0 [accessed Apr. 2016].
- ¹¹⁸ "Any artist should be ready for misinterpretation from the public ... Every public has their own personal experiences that influence their perception, and this freedom is great. I want to give that freedom to the public so it doesn't matter if people insult me or yell at me or admire me, I don't care what they think." Quoted in Rachel Will, "Indonesia's Maverick Performance Artist".
- ¹¹⁹ I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback for the development of this article. I would also like to thank Neil Manton for kindly allowing me access to his library of Malaysian art history materials; the National Art Gallery of Malaysia (*Balai Seni Visual Negara*), the National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum), and the artists Amron Omar and Melati Suryodarmo, for their kind assistance and permission to reproduce the images which appear in this article; and Yap Saubin for kind assistance with accessing key research materials from Malaysia.

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