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WULAN DIRGANTORO

Abstract

Despite feminism's inclusion in the Indonesian art world lexicon in the 1990s, there are still obstacles till this day in finding a suitable or less problematic framework for analysing works by women artists. This paper proposes an alternative framework through which to re-imagine the Indonesian female body across generations in the works of some of Indonesia's women artists such as Emiria Sunassa, IGAK Murniasih and Dita Gambiro.

Indonesian writers and scholars have tried to some extent to reintroduce women artists and their works previously ignored by the male-dominated Indonesian art history. However, they often fail to address the deeper patriarchal structure that shaped the conditions. The core of this paper thus focuses on strategies of interrogation that aim to reveal not only women's socio-historically specific forms of visual representation but also the patriarchal structure that surrounds them.

"Tubuh perempuan ia tidak pernah memaknai, tetapi selalu dimaknai. Itu yang ingin aku rebut kembali" (Arahmaiani, 2003, pp. 172).

[A woman never defines her own body but is always being defined by others. That is what I want to recapture.]¹

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Introduction

Feminism as a discourse in visual arts has moved across different geographical, political and sociocultural borders since its heyday in the 1960s in North America and Europe. When it entered the Indonesian visual arts lexicon in the 1990s, together with postmodernism and post-structuralism, feminism was accepted as part of a broader discussion on the push to bring back sociopolitical issues in Indonesian artistic practice.

In contrast to postmodernism in Indonesia, until today feminism has not been sufficiently theorised in the Indonesian context, even though many Indonesian women artists have long engaged with feminism—either ideologically or philosophically—through their artistic practice. The situation has resulted in a limited understanding of the discourse in the visual arts.

The article thus examines how feminism moves and interacts with the specificities of the Indonesian situation—and the paradoxical formations resulting thereof, not only from visual art but also from other fields such as literature. The article will discuss existing frameworks through which various Indonesian scholars have produced their analyses, before proposing alternative frameworks that allow a more nuanced investigation to analyse works by Indonesian women artists. Through transgenerational comparison, it will examine the works of Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964), IGAK Murniasih (1966–2001) and Dita Gambiro (b. 1986) in order to reimagine the representation of the female body in Indonesian visual arts.

In-between: Exploring Feminist-inspired Methodologies

Indonesian writers have attempted to explain and investigate the rise of postmodernism in Indonesian visual arts in the 1990s in various publications. Significant publications, such as *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Indonesian Contemporary Art Scene* (2001), *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual: Politik dan Gender* [Aspects of Visual Arts: Politics and Gender] (2001) and anthology *Seni Rupa Indonesia dalam Kritik dan Esai* [Indonesian Fine Arts in Critiques and Essays] (2012), have cited feminism as one of the critical theories that began to circulate in Indonesian visual arts in the 1990s.

However, the texts have little to say about the development of feminism as a distinct artistic practice in Indonesia, as well as a body of knowledge. In reality, many Indonesian women artists have engaged with various forms of feminism, directly or indirectly, to articulate their ideas and artistic practice. Their diverse practices have been understood thus far through female-centric analysis or framed through a male perspective within the Indonesian context. While these binary approaches of either/or have narrowed the content of a

highly diverse concept, one can also see this situation as an illustration of a dialogical model in conceptual engagement.

Nonetheless, as the literary theorist Mieke Bal suggested, while practice can pronounce on theoretical validity, without theoretical validity, no practice can be evaluated.² Indeed, what has happened so far in Indonesia reflects the lack of theoretical validity to evaluate the existing practice. For example, Indonesian male and female critics often rendered the breadth and depth of many feminist-inspired visual practices in Indonesia as mere 'personal' reflection.³ It is worth noting that for many Indonesian women artists, feminism is not necessarily a concept that emanated from scholarly or academic engagement, but a practice that developed from their lived experience as women.

Some of the approaches that engage with women's lived experience focus on their biographies, use their works to represent the artists' narratives and reflect the sociocultural contexts of the artworks. This approach elevates the personal history and narrative of the artists, historically often ignored by (Western) mainstream art critics yet enthusiastically embraced in the Indonesian context by both artists and writers.

Moreover, personal subject matter, such as the everyday life of Indonesian women/artists that so far were considered to be a private domain or limited to feminine spaces, is interpreted openly by writers as a question mark or as a challenge to patriarchal views. In addition, art historian Ira Adriati proposed that Indonesian women artists' deep engagement with the private world also comes from the need to create art as a realisation of personal potential. Adriati further argued that their artistic practice is tied to a sense of fulfilment as well as to a sense of validation of their capabilities within mainstream society.⁴

The approach above seeks to turn personal history into something visible through representational strategies, thus transforming the personal into something political. It also reinforces the prevailing view of art as a direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience when art is, in fact, a part of social production—it is productive and it actively produces meanings. Furthermore, it is constitutive of ideology; it does not merely illustrate or translate the artist's personal life on canvas.⁵ Such a reading possibly not only limits the potential for different interpretations of their works but also reduces the elaborate symbolism in the artworks.⁶

Other writers have used the notion of *écriture féminine* to analyse women-centred texts. Because this framework emphasises the need for women to 'write their own body', some Indonesian literary scholars have adopted this framework as a tool to analyse Indonesian women's writing.⁷ Pamela Allen

noted that the need for such an explanatory framework seemed to have arisen particularly after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, when the rigid gender role imposed by the state also collapsed, albeit momentarily.⁸

In the field of visual arts, Enin Supriyanto and Farah Wardani, Indonesian art curator and art historian respectively, have used *écriture féminine* in their writings as a starting point to analyse the representation of women in cultural productions, particularly in post-New Order Indonesia.⁹

For example, Farah Wardani's reading of the Balinese artist IGAK Murniasih (1966–2006) brings out elements of the artist's works often overlooked by mainstream art critics:

“Pada Murni, melukis seolah menjadi sarana masturbasi. Dalam sebuah lingkungan di mana seks menjadi obsesi sekaligus komoditas, tubuh wanita diartikan sedemikian rupa hingga menempatkan perempuan dalam sebuah penjara narsisme yang pasif. Melihat karya-karya Murni seperti diingatkan akan sisi lain dari seksualitas wanita, suatu hasrat yang narsistik untuk merebut kembali tubuh sendiri yang telah terlalu banyak terperkosakan, diserahkan untuk dinikmati yang lain. Dalam persetubuhan dengan setiap organnya sendiri, tubuh itu menemukan dirinya kembali” (Farah Wardani, 2003, n.p.).

[In Murni's works, painting acts like masturbation. In an environment where sex becomes an obsession as well as commodity, a woman's body is worshipped to the extent that she is trapped within a passive narcissist prison. Looking at Murni's works, we are reminded about the other side of women's sexuality, a narcissist desire to reclaim one's own body after being violated, given for the others to enjoy. The body reclaims itself by copulating with each of its parts.]¹⁰

IGAK Murniasih's subject matter focuses mainly on female desire and sexuality framed by a Balinese context. The combination of the subject matter and the complex personal history of the artist make her works very compelling to read through an autobiographical perspective, as explained above. However, Wardani's reading moved beyond the personal narrative or the artist's biography. She suggested that the representation of disembodied organs is a way for the artist to reclaim her pleasure from the symbolic. Wardani's feminist reading suggested that the female body and sexuality can also be theorised through visuality and not merely presented as an object for viewing pleasure.

The above approaches by scholars and writers characterise the broader debate on feminism and artistic practice in Indonesia. While it must be acknowledged that there is no single, unitary concept of feminism, the current scholarship has shown some shared values in reading feminism within the practices of Indonesian women artists: it is positioned as a female-centric discourse or as a reaction against hegemonic patriarchy.

This article argues for a twofold approach: strategies of correction and strategies of interrogation as frameworks to provide an alternative reading of works by Indonesian women artists. Both strategies have the potential to navigate the binary position mentioned previously and, in particular, to negotiate the male gaze and contextualise the artworks within a women-centred discourse.

Strategies of correction have primarily been employed within feminist art history by (re)introducing and (re)inserting women artists previously ignored by the masculine structure. For example, the book *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens* (YSRI, 2007) included Tridjoto Abdullah (1917–89), a little-known sculptor who was active in the 1940s. Similarly, the *Intimate Distance: Feminism and Indonesian Contemporary Art* exhibition at the National Gallery of Indonesia (2007) included the late Masmundari (1904–2005), a popular folk artist. The writers and curator of the exhibition included both these artists as an attempt to expand the discussion of gender and art-making across periods and genres within Indonesian modern and contemporary art history. Nonetheless, there are limitations to this strategy, namely that (re)introduction and (re)insertion often only critique the patriarchal structure without sufficiently explaining how the structure works to marginalise women artists or how it was created in the first place.

Arguably, it is still necessary to engage with this strategy in the Indonesian context. Indonesian scholars and academics are still making discoveries about art and artists, especially in relation to works by artists active in the early years of Indonesian modern art. For example, Heidi Arbuckle's excellent work on Emiria Sunassa (1897–1968) and the publication of Mia Bustam's (1920–2011) memoirs highlighted the possibilities of rediscovery projects in Indonesian art history.¹¹

In parallel with the previous framework, the strategy of interrogation examines visual strategies and the sociocultural formation of artworks more closely to open up a discursive space on female subjectivity in Indonesia. Reflecting on Pollock's 'active re-reading' strategy, the interrogation strategy works by investigating the current discourse through an active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation.¹² Furthermore, the search for a nuanced framework that fits

the Indonesian context needs what Pollock has suggested—a polylogue, the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative reading where one can read the power dynamics of culture through its entanglement with various discourses. An active re-reading of these works also reveals how an alternative reading can produce interpretations that are closer to a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body.

The following section will discuss one of the strategies of interrogation through the reading of excess in the works by Emiria Sunassa (1897–1968), IGAK Murniasih (1966–2006) and Dita Gambiro (b.1986). The notion of excess/object destabilising and disorganising selfhood is one of such approaches useful in analysing works by Indonesian women artists. Abjection is attractive to feminist scholars and art historians because it offers the possibility that ‘reading for the object’ within specific cultural domains can challenge or displace the disciplinary norms that frame dominant representations of gender. Moreover, theorists also see the practice of object criticism as variously exposing, disrupting and transcoding the historical and cultural associations between women’s bodies, reproduction and the object.¹³

The object and the grotesque gained resonance in both the literary field and visual arts in post-New Order Indonesia, especially during the early years of *Reformasi* (1998). While the fall of the New Order opened all channels of social, political and cultural expressions previously repressed by the authoritarian regime, more importantly, it also gave rise to marked visibility of gender issues, from sexuality to domestic violence, in the mainstream media. At the same time, the period was also a time of political uncertainties and sporadic violence across Indonesia. Entang Wiharso, an artist who was based in Yogyakarta during the time, noted that there was a sense of loss of moral cohesion, and Indonesia experienced a big *amuk* [psychic disturbance, followed by a manic urge to murder].¹⁴

While Indonesian female writers such as Ayu Utami and Maesa Djenar Ayu have addressed to some degree the subversive female body in their works, discussion about the representation of the female body in visual arts is still centred on the prevailing view of the feminine ideal, notably motherhood, objectification of beauty and ‘ethnic’ types. By employing an analysis of the object, the strategy engages with several women-centred approaches. Firstly, the excess/object notion explicitly rejects the valorisation of the feminine through an emphasis on the everyday and the chaotic, particularly through the ‘low’ senses. For example, paintings by Emiria and Murniasih in this article feature similar elements: the naked female body, violence and excess.

Secondly, the focus on the excess/object also has the potential to engage with the pre-modern past. By circumventing Indonesia’s nationalistic and

male-centric art history, the framing could tap into gendered and cultural specificities that exist outside/alongside the mainstream art historical reading. In the literary field, Gadis Arivia, feminist and academic, have engaged the writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Toeti Heraty on the figure of Calon Arang, an embodiment of a witch and the female grotesque in Balinese mythology, as a feminist icon.¹⁵ Moreover, the discussion of Murniasih's work below will analyse how the artist's approach in representing excess is not only a reflection of her close connection with her Balinese context, but also a strategy to emphasise otherness as something that is not simply superadded, but which also undermines and problematises patriarchy.

More importantly, framing the case studies of three different artists across different periods allows a more in-depth investigation into the changing of themes, styles, and politics through an intergenerational approach. Such an approach could critically appraise the different methodologies and theoretical approaches (or lack thereof) in Indonesian art history when examining works by women artists.

Excess: Politics of the Feminine

In discussing excess, Elizabeth Grosz, philosopher, reminds us that throughout its long philosophical history, excess is conceptualised as that which outstrips and finds no stable place in an orderly system, or within systematicity itself. Its most crucial condition is its otherness, its outside-ness to the systems that it exceeds and outstrips.¹⁶ Furthermore, for feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, excess is represented by that which is othered and rendered as a kind of human representation of this waste, namely women and femininity.¹⁷ In this framing, excess of femininity emphasises the positivity and performability of desire and power of the feminine to redefine the symbolic.¹⁸

Emiria Sunassa (1897–1968) is often labelled as the 'Mother of Indonesian Modern Art', because she was one of the few women painters active during the early years of Indonesian modern art. During her active period from the 1940s to the late 1950s, Sunassa produced a series of paintings that presented a different kind of narrative from the rest of her contemporaries, namely members of Persagi (Union of Indonesian Painters, the first native art association in Dutch East Indies). While the members of Persagi painted nationalist subject matter, Emiria focused on portraits of indigenous people and female nudes that were not part of the nationalist or modern art discourse of the time.

In her later period (the 1950s), however, she painted a series of nude self-portraits that represented the female body from a new perspective.



FIGURE 1: Emiria Sunassa, *Pensive*, 1957, oil on canvas, 68 × 51 cm. Image courtesy of Heidi Arbuckle.

Heidi Arbuckle's study has examined Sunassa's nude self-portrait as a way for the artist to escape the confinement of her ailing body, in particular, her last-known painting titled *Pensive* (1957, oil on canvas, 68 × 51 cm) (Figure 1). Arbuckle assigned titles to a few of Emiria's paintings during her ten-year research project on the artist for identification purposes. Emiria Sunassa left many of her works untitled or undated; for the latter, Arbuckle cross-referenced the style and subject matter with the artist's other existing works.¹⁹

The painting is unusual in that it departed from the stylistic approach of the artist during that period. Firstly, the broad brushstrokes are more impressionistic and in stark contrast with the controlled strokes and careful composition of her other works in the series. The artist seemed to have abandoned her exploration of cubism of that period and returned to her expressionist style, as exemplified by her depiction of the foreground and background in the painting, with the different parts melding together through an abstraction of colour and brushstrokes.

Emiria also added other elements that emphasised the oddity of the painting. The figure is holding her head with her eyes closed. Her lips are thinly stretched and her expression seems to suggest exasperation or

exhaustion. A disembodied foot rests on the left shoulder, which Arbuckle read as “a gesture of confinement”, while a red flower appears on the right side of the shoulder.²⁰ The artist also elongated the elbow of the left hand until it resembled a foot, and this hand/foot hangs above a red organic object, adding another layer of symbolism in the painting. She also added traces of a face on the hybrid hand/foot.

Secondly, Arbuckle noted that in the late 1950s Sunassa painted at least four female nudes, all in cubist style with visual references indicating that they are possibly self-portraits of the artist through the depiction of a *sanggul* (traditional hair bun). In contrast to the other series, she painted the naked female figure with loose hair disappearing into the green background. Furthermore, the figure is standing outdoors and is detached from any association with a domestic context. While the artist also painted a house on the right and a blooming orchard on the left side of the canvas, the overall mood of the painting is of distancing and turmoil, as suggested by the figure’s body language.

Arbuckle stated that the painting is “elusive” and “difficult to read”, and suggested that the painting could be seen as emblematic of the transformation that occurred in the artist’s life and self-identity shortly before she left Jakarta for unknown reasons. The figure is not depicted in full length but is cut off just below the crotch area. Violence is implied through the depiction of the displaced body parts; in addition to the missing legs, the arms and the breasts appear to be added on, rather than forming a cohesive part of the body. Drawing on the artist’s personal history, the representation of violence in the painting appeared to arise from external influences, but could also be the artist’s personal reflection on aging. Arbuckle’s reading, however, gave the painting a feminist perspective—it was an act of defiance against the male, colonial way of looking by the artist through a celebration of the grotesque body.²¹

While it is entirely possible to read the painting through an autobiographical approach, the following section will compare Emiria’s painting with IGAK Murniasih’s work to examine in what ways a comparative approach through the framing of abjection could contribute to re-imagining female subjectivity in Indonesian art history.

Despite Emiria’s relative isolation in the art world and posthumous recognition, the painting’s elements appear in the works of IGAK Murniasih, the late Balinese artist briefly mentioned in the previous section. IGAK Murniasih shared a similar background with Emiria Sunassa in that she was also self-taught. She studied painting under the mentorship of Dewa Putu Mokoh (1934–2010), a painter based in Pengosekan, Ubud. Murniasih then



FIGURE 2: IGAK Murniasih, *Nyut-nyut* [Throbbing], 2001, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate and Ketemu Project.

joined Seniwati Gallery, a women-only gallery in Ubud (Bali), where the gallery owner Mary Northmore-Aziz introduced her works to various art critics and curators who visited the gallery.

The symbolism and style of Murniasih's body of work can be traced to her deep roots in Balinese culture. Her style of painting derived from her training with Mokoh,²² but she further simplified and flattened the forms and often reduced the background to a single block of colour, a contrast to the relatively busy background of the artistic convention of the Pengosekan school. Like Mokoh, Murniasih was also interested in depicting the ordinary, everyday life but with female subjectivity.

The combination of sex, abjection and violence as her dominant subject matter, together with her often candid media interviews about her turbulent personal history, made her works vulnerable to media sensationalism. Moreover, Indonesian writers and curators have described Murniasih's paintings as 'bizarre' and 'surreal'. I have also discussed elsewhere that the labelling comes from the patriarchal discomfort that arises when confronted with an overt statement of female desire.²³ The painting *Nyut-nyut* [Throbbing] (2001, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 100 cm) (Figure 2), which will be discussed below, superficially embodied the labelling of Murniasih's body of work.

The painting depicts three anomalous figures/objects with only the central figure identifiable as human with the characteristics of a female. The artist painted the figure sideways as naked and wearing a pair of boots. She elongated both arms, with one extending over the figure's head like an umbrella. One hand passes through the figure's stomach, and the other hand sticks its thumb into the crotch. The hand that goes through the stomach is open, and long claws on the hand is entwined with flowing red hair. Two objects flank the central figure in reverse mirroring, whose shapes suggest pregnant female bodies wearing high-heeled shoes topped by heads with the geometrical structures found in Balinese temple architecture.

In Murniasih's painting, the body parts that 'violate' each other have been transformed into a representation of the entanglement of female grotesque, excess and desire. When we look at the painting, our eyes are immediately drawn to the sinuous black lines and the circular effect generated by the arms and hair that convey a sense of centrality, rather than the violence implied by most writers. Both the head and the circularity of the arms echo the Balinese symbol of *yantra lingkaran* (circular diagram), which symbolises unity and the wheel of life.

The ambiguous title of the painting also helps us to understand the artist's idea. *Nyut-nyut* is an Indonesian slang word that describes the throbbing sensation caused by either pain or pleasure. The ambiguous word also helps to emphasise the narrative content in the painting, as well as being a way for the artist to affirm her version of female pleasure. Thus, instead of depicting violence or masochistic desire, the violated female body in this painting could represent a *jouissance* in knowing and accepting the intensity of the desire from *within* the feminine.

In pairing the two paintings by Emiria Sunassa and IGAK Murniasih, we can arguably trace the 'lineage' of Murniasih's visual language to Emiria's paintings, such as through the excess of body parts and the representation of the naked female body. Conventional art history might make this connection to explain the reoccurrence of specific motifs and symbols in an artist's body of work; however, Emiria's work was only 'rediscovered' by a handful of art historians in the mid-2000s. Moreover, the painting *Pensive* is not part of Emiria's more known works—it is in a private collection and quite possibly has never been exhibited before. Murniasih was also a self-taught artist. While she was familiar with Western and Indonesian art texts, it is quite unlikely that she had seen or was familiar with Emiria Sunassa's works before she passed away in 2006. Paradoxically, rather than representing continuation, the two artworks represented ruptures in mainstream Indonesian art historiography.

The focus on excess that exists within the framing of the abject thus reconnects them thematically through their representational strategy. Here we could argue that both artists used an excess of femininity not only to reject the patriarchal gaze, but also to elevate their personal history to the foreground through universally symbolic signs. More importantly, the framing also recontextualises them in Indonesian art history through a women-centred approach in Indonesian art.

Nonetheless, Mary Russo, literary theorist, warns that the risk of affirmative abjection is that it might reproduce rather than challenge the cultural production of women as abject.²⁴ Similarly Martin Jay, art historian and critic, questions: “[H]ow can the artist avoid the sublimating elevation of abjection into precisely the idealised state it is supposed to undermine?”²⁵

The combined impact of the artists’ narrative and unusual subject matter reflect the problems discussed by the above scholars and what happened gradually with Murniasih’s body of work and, to some extent, Emiria’s as well. Murniasih’s paintings have been hailed as celebrating the strength and creativity of Balinese women, particularly through her expressions of sexuality and exposure of the imbalance in traditional Balinese gender relations.²⁶ In looking for a female lineage in Indonesian art history, scholars positioned Emiria as pioneer and the ‘mother’ of Indonesian modern art, alongside the male pioneers from Persagi, by elevating her otherness.

While these new labels are arguably positive and should, given the paucity of studies on Indonesian women artists, be welcomed, this reading of the works still risks being labelled as a “women’s topic”. In Indonesia, there is a general belief that women artists only speak of their personal experience, and an audience facing these two paintings may encounter this existing framing. Both Emiria and Murniasih’s paintings, particularly the self-portraits of the former, often tapped into their narratives as women and outsiders. How then can a strategy of interrogation counter this framing?

This article proposes to read these two paintings alongside the work by a younger artist, Dita Gambiro (b. 1986). Dita was trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology. She works predominantly on three-dimensional works, from sculpture to installation, and with an emphasis on the intersection between forms and the feminine. Up till 2017 she focused on the use of hair as her primary medium and theme.

Dita’s sculpture titled *Stay* (2012, synthetic fibre, iron and polyurethane, 200 × 120 × 90 cm) (Figure 3) was first exhibited in a group exhibition at Gajah Gallery, Singapore in 2012. The curatorial premise asked seven Indonesian artists to respond to the song “The Fountain of Lamneth” (1975), which was also the title of the exhibition, by the American progressive rock

FIGURE 3: Dita Gambiro, *Stay*, 2012, synthetic fibre, iron and polyurethane, 200 × 120 × 90 cm. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery, Singapore.



group Rush. The curatorial aim was to explore the connection and tension between creative practice and dark fantasies.²⁷

The 20-minute song provided the guiding theme of the exhibition and artworks. For the exhibition, the curator Aminudin TH Siregar assigned each artist certain parts of the song. The sculpture *Stay* was Dita's response to the part ("Panacea") assigned to her. The sculpture is a single bed with the feet joined together such that it resembles a rocking bed. Both the frame and the mattress are covered in synthetic hair that is plaited, tucked and brushed to form a thick, dense mass of black hair. In the exhibition space, the sculpture is placed in a separate room and juxtaposed with a kinetic installation by Bagus Pandega.

At first glance, the appearance of a bed invites people to rest—as implied by the title "Stay"—while the smaller exhibition space also provides a sense of intimacy. The rocking movement of the bed—not unlike the movement of a baby cot—adds to the sense of comfort. For Aminudin, the sculpture evokes a dark mood that encourages the mind to pause and reflect, as suggested by the lyrics of "Panacea":²⁸

*The whiteness of confusion
Is unfolding from my mind
I stare around in wonder
Have I left my life behind
I catch the scent of ambergris
And turn my head ... surprised*

*My gaze is caught and held
And I am helpless, mesmerized*

*Panacea ~ liquid grace
Oh let me touch your fragile face
Enchantment falls around me
And I know I cannot leave
Here's a meaning for my life
A shelter from the storm
Pacify my troubles with
Her body soft and warm
Naked in our unity
A smile for every tear
Gentle hands that promise me
Comfort through the years
Yet I know I must be gone
Before the light of dawn*

*Panacea ~ passion pure
I can't resist your gentle lure
My heart will lie beside you
And my wandering body grieves.²⁹*

According to the curator, the sculpture alluded to a “cosmically calm phase but buried desire from below”, as represented by the lyrics above.³⁰ Nonetheless, the artist altered the interpretation of the song by using strategies of the abject, starting with the colour black to echo the dark mood from the last line in the lyrics. Also, the inviting and intimate atmosphere was confronted with the semi-public context, i.e., the gallery space, and most importantly, the material that covered the structure, namely the hair.

For the artist, the hair is a symbol of femininity and also a signifier for the social construction of womanhood in Indonesia.³¹ Julia Suryakusuma, academic and feminist, wrote about the importance of the hair bun (*sanggul*) as part of the ‘national costume’, together with the *kebaya* (Javanese-style blouse), in New Order Indonesia. In her discussion, Indonesian women, regardless of their ethnic background, were expected to don the blouse as a sign of support when they appeared in state or national functions.³² Although in post-New Order Indonesia, women are no longer expected to wear the *kebaya* and *sanggul* for a public function, they often remain the default choice for a public display of femininity as confirmed by the artist.

Using the lens of abjection, the hair in Dita's work also functions as an ab/object. Julia Kristeva, literary critic and philosopher, argues that what is abjected does not disappear altogether; it hovers at the periphery of one's existence, continually challenging one's fragile borders of selfhood.³³ Indeed, when hair is still part of the body, it is seen as a symbol of physical strength, beauty and virility, yet after it is shed or cut away, it is no longer desirable. More importantly, the fallen or cut off hair often elicits feelings of disgust. The artist's deliberate use of synthetic hair also speaks of loss due to sickness or other conditions, as well as of dissimulation. Thus the use of hair in the sculpture belied the expectation of "[h]er body soft and warm" suggested by the lyrics. Instead of generating peace and comfort from the feminine, the work is, in fact, deeply unsettling, as it speaks of ambiguity, loss and concealment.

Furthermore, the strength of Dita's work lies perhaps not in the mind, as alluded to by the curator, but in the materiality of the medium and its affect. The simultaneous invitation/rejection implied by the form (and its associated meaning of rest/peace) and the medium (waste/disgust) also highlighted the importance of the senses. The senses at play in the artwork came not only from vision but also from the haptic; in the making of the sculpture, both vision (in the drawing and artistic development) and touch (in the plaiting, tucking and brushing) were deeply interconnected with the sensuality and physicality of the (female) body.

The shift from the representational in the paintings by Emiria Sunassa and IGAK Murniasih to the affective in Dita's artistic practice offers a possibility for a new discursive space in reading the feminine in Indonesian modern and contemporary arts. The sculpture *Stay* was replete with objects of excess, such as hair. It emphasised the female body that produced its meaning, but at the same time, abandoned the figurative representation commonly used by many women artists. By reading the feminine beyond figurative representation, the strategy of interrogation acknowledges the presence of the (absent) female body through the materiality of the medium, instead of its autobiographical background. At the same time, the strategy also allows the artist's practice to be theorised through the reading of the abject, in order to build a discussion about female subjectivity in an Indonesian context.

Conclusion

While feminism may have paved the way for articulating the female experience in post-New Order visual arts in Indonesia, the articulation is not without its inherent paradoxes and issues. One of the issues is the ambiguities

in the ideological construction of Indonesian women in the post-New Order era. The female agency is still split between the perception of modern womanhood—independent and urbane—and the more common perception of harmonious domesticity in their primary roles as mother and wife through, for example, idealised representations of motherhood.

Without privileging one position over the other, the ambiguities often result in the production of texts in literary studies and visual arts that are contradictory and revealing at the same time. In visual arts, this paradox is also compounded by the lack of sustained gender critique in the Indonesian art discourse, which often labels women artist's creative practices as 'women's topics'.

In this article, the use of both strategies of correction and interrogation offers a more nuanced way of reading the representation of the female body in Indonesia. These strategies, particularly the strategy of interrogation, seek to open up possibilities in reading the representation of the female body through a women-centred discourse. The use of the abject utilises the personal narrative of the artist, yet at the same time situates it within the artist's visual and conceptual strategy. By focusing on the representation of excess in these works, we see how the excluded elements (hair, body waste) reveal the fragility of the symbolism that relies on these elements. Moreover, the framing acknowledges the cultural context that shaped their narrative as well as its transgressive nature to reframe the female body in Indonesian visual arts.

Nonetheless, the danger of essentialising or valorising the feminine is always present. For example, the analyses of abjection and the grotesque are still relatively open to a celebratory type of reading, as shown by the uncritical acceptance of Emiria Sunassa's and IGAK Murniasih's body of work. Moreover, the analyses tend to frame the representation of the female body through figurative strategy. While the analyses have outlined the potential of the abject and the grotesque in rejecting the male gaze, given the long realist tradition of representing the female body as the archetype of femininity in Indonesian visual arts, the task of un-reading the female body remains particularly challenging.

The comparative reading of the two paintings with Dita Gambiro's sculpture *Stay* proposed that a non-figurative strategy has the potential to represent the female body through the focus on the materiality of the artwork. The artist's use of hair in her sculpture highlighted a female subjectivity in the making and producing of meaning. At the same time, the artwork also pointed out the instability of the 'feminine' signs through the use of synthetic fibre. Furthermore, the active re-reading, as suggested by Pollock, enables

the various pathways to reimagine the representation of the female body, from engaging with Western theories to connecting with the national and cultural context and background of the artist in Indonesia. By highlighting the complexities, an awareness of body politics in the Indonesian context serves as an entry point to understanding how a strategic reading might produce feminist texts.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- ¹ Arahmaiani, "Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin" [Culture is Gendered], in *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia: Politik dan Gender* [Aspects of Indonesian Visual Arts: Politics and Gender], ed. A. Wicaksono, Sumartono, A. Kurniawan et al. (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2003), p. 172.
- ² Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 14.
- ³ See, for example, MD Marianto, "Recognising New Pillars in the Indonesian Art World", in *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Woman*, ed. Binghui Huangfu (Singapore: LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore, 2000), pp. 139–45; T. Mas'ad, "Kemurnian Murni" [Murni's Purity], *Panji* (25 Oct. 2000): 100; S. Wisetrotomo, "Melukis sebagai pembebasan" [Painting To Be Free], *Pelita*, 8 June 1986, n.p.
- ⁴ Ira Adriati, *Manifestasi Pola Aktualisasi Diri dalam Karya Perempuan Perupa Kontemporer Indonesia* [Manifestation of Self-Actualisation in the Works of Indonesian Contemporary Women Artists], PhD, Program Studi Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Bandung, 2010.
- ⁵ See Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics", in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 120–41. Also Linda Nochlin, "Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), pp. 147–58.
- ⁶ Moreover, the reading also invites accusations of over-subjective readings from the scholar when objective, rational distance is expected from such work. Paradoxically, the objective, rational reading almost always embodies a masculine framework in reading or interpreting artworks. The search for female-based visual language thus faces a significant stumbling block, as it cannot escape the prescribed masculine framework. For further discussion, see Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London, New York: Routledge 1999).
- ⁷ Melani Budianta, "Merekam Penulis Perempuan dalam Kesejarahan Kesustraan" [Documenting Women Writers in Literary History], *Jurnal Perempuan* (2003): 100–7. Also, Intan Paramaditha, "Tracing the White Ink: The Maternal Body in Indonesian Women's Writing", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41, 2 (2007): 67–8.
- ⁸ See Pamela Allen, "Beyond écriture féminine", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41, 2 (2007): 25–40.
- ⁹ See, for example, Farah Wardani, *Dekonstruksi Gender dalam Teks dan Praktik Seni Rupa: Perempuan Sebagai Tanda* [Gender Deconstruction in Texts and Art Practices: Women as Signs], http://www.unisosdem.org/ekopol_detail.

php?aid=2574&coid=3&caid=10 [accessed 6 Nov. 2008] (orig. published in *Kompas*, 5 Sept. 2003).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Heidi Arbuckle, *Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/colonial Indonesia*, PhD thesis, Asia Institute and the Department of History, Gender Studies, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2011. See also Mia Bustam, *Sudjojono dan Aku* [Sudjojono and Me] (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, Jakarta, 2006) and *Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Cerita Seorang Perempuan* [From Camp to Camp: A Woman's Story] (Jakarta: Spasi & VHR Book, 2007).

¹² See Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 8.

¹³ One of the most influential texts of abject criticism is Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). For criticism on abjection, see, for example, Joseph L. Koerner, "The Abject of Art History", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (1997): 5–8; Imogen Tyler, "Against Abjection", *Feminist Theory* 10 (2009): 77–99.

¹⁴ Wiharso explained the ideas behind his seminal exhibition *NusaAmuk* (2001) in "Indonesia Sakit: Indonesian Disorders and the Subjective Experience and Interpretive Politics of Contemporary Indonesian Artists", in *Postcolonial Disorders*, ed. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Sarah Pinto and Byron T. Good (University of California Press, 2008), p. 87. In a similar vein, see the discussion of Dicky Tjandra's installation *Dukaku Indonesiaku* [My Indonesia, My Sorrow] by Elizabeth Morrell, "Ethnicity, Art and Politics away from the Indonesian Centre", *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 15, 2 (2000): 255–72.

¹⁵ Gadis Arivia, "Calon Arang, Sudah Feminis!" [Calong Arang is Already a Feminist!], in *Feminisme: Sebuah Kata Hati* [Feminism: A Calling of the Heart] (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2006), pp. 154–62. For primary sources, see Toeti Heraty, *Calon Arang Kisah Perempuan Korban Patriarki* [Calon Arang. The Story of a Woman Victim of Patriarchy] (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1999) and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Calon Arang* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 1999).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, "Architecture of Excess", in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 152–3.

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 78.

¹⁸ Grosz, "Architecture of Excess", p. 157.

¹⁹ Heidi Arbuckle, *Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/colonial Indonesia*, 2011.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

- ²² For a discussion of Mokoh's work, see Adrian Vickers, *Balinese Art: Paintings and Drawings of Bali 1800–2010* (New York, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), p. 207. For recent discussions about Mokoh and Murniasih's artistic collaboration, see Jean Couteau, "Mokoh and OoTotol: A Brief Introduction", in exh. cat. *Celebrating Murni*, Sudakara Art Space, Ketemu Project, Ubud, 16 July–18 Sept. 2016, pp. 30–1.
- ²³ See Wulan Dirgantoro, "Female Desire and the Monstrous-Feminine in the Works of IGAK Murniasih", in *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), pp. 119–42.
- ²⁴ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 65.
- ²⁵ Martin Jay, "Abjection Overruled", *Salmagundi* 103 (1994): 242.
- ²⁶ Jean Couteau, "Murni's Woman Call", in exh. cat. *Celebrating Murni*, Sudakara Art Space, Ketemu Project, Ubud, 16 July–18 Sept. 2016, pp. 8–9.
- ²⁷ Aminudin TH Siregar, "The Fountain of Lamneth—An Art Project", in exh. cat. *The Fountain of Lamneth*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore, 21 April–25 May 2012, p. 8.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Rush, "The Fountain of Lamneth", 1975, <https://www.rush.com/songs/the-fountain-of-lamneth/> [accessed 10 Sept. 2018].
- ³⁰ Aminudin TH Siregar, "The Fountain of Lamneth—An Art Project", p. 13.
- ³¹ Gajah Gallery, *Dita Gambiro*, press release, 2012, n.p.
- ³² Julia I. Suryakusuma, "Kebaya Creates the Woman? And the Man? National Costume as Identity, Expression, and Oppression", in *Sex, Power and Nation. An Anthology of Writings 1979–2003* (Jakarta: Metafor Publishing, 2004), pp. 217–23.
- ³³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

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